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TO: Seanad Public Consultation Committee

RE: Consultation on Travellers, towards a more equitable Ireland

A chairde uaisle,

I offer this submission to the committee, with a focus on the role of education – and in particular the record of the Irish state, and of state policy, in relation to early years education of Travellers – in attaining the stated goal of a ‘more equitable Ireland’ in the context of state policy regarding the Travelling Community. My submission draws primarily on the work of my late mother, Dr Anne Boyle, who was for many years a Teacher in a Preschool for Traveller Children in Galway City (one of 52 nationwide), and whose doctoral research, and later work, focused on the Traveller preschools. The work is distinctive in that it is the only major study undertaken about Traveller preschools in Ireland and the only one to examine parental involvement practices within Traveller preschools. The research provides insight into the impact of the policy interventions of the past, and provides lessons for future action.

My mother was passionate about the potential of education to serve human emancipation, and of the potential of quality early-years education to support both personal development of individual children, and broader social goals of equality and inclusion. As an educator, a scholar, and an activist, she was committed to a vision of equality that embraced diversity. She was glad to – finally – see recognition of Travellers as a distinct ethnic group, but recognised, too, that this welcome development required commitment of appropriate resources, an inclusive intercultural approach to public services (including not only education, but also areas such as accommodation), and ongoing dialogue and engagement. Through to her death early this year she continued to work with her partners to disseminate her research on Traveller education, in the hope that it would prove of benefit to those seeking to develop policy and practice in this area.

I hope that you will find the details provided below of use in your work, and commend you in your goal of securing a more equitable Ireland.



Dr Andrew Ó Baoill

Sources

The output of this research project has been published previously in a number of forms and settings, including in a number of post-PhD collaborations with Drs Joan Hanafin, Marie Flynn, and Liam Boyle. The constraints of the consultation process mean it is possible only to include brief excerpts here. However, those interested in reading further can consult some of the following, several of which are readily available online, or alternatively direct from myself:

Boyle, Anne, Joan Hanafin, and Marie Flynn. "Parental involvement: Irish travellers and early years education." *Encounters in Theory and History of Education*, 19, 2018, pp. 186-204.

Boyle, Anne, Marie Flynn, and Joan Hanafin. "From absorption to inclusion: The evolution of Irish state policy on Travellers." *Social Capital and Enterprise in the Modern State*, edited by Éidín Ní Shé, Lorelle J. Burton, Patrick Alan Danaher, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018, pp. 75-115.

Hanafin, Joan, Boyle, Anne, Boyle, Liam, & Flynn, Marie. "Inclusion and leadership in diverse and challenging contexts: Irish travellers and early years education." *Leading and Managing* 24.2 (2018): 44.

Boyle, Anne. *A study of the involvement of Traveller parents in Traveller preschools in Ireland*. Diss. Dublin City University, 2014.

Boyle, Anne. "Traveller Parents and Early Childhood Education." *Beyond Educational Disadvantage*, edited by Paul Downes, Ann Louise Gilligan, Institute of Public Administration, 2007, pp. 259-267.

Boyle, Anne. "Traveller Education in Ireland Parental Involvement in Preschool Education." *Aesthetika: International Journal on Culture, Subjectivity and Aesthetics*, 2 (2), 2006, pp. 33-43.

Boyle, A. "A profile of the special preschools for Traveller children." *Unpublished MEd dissertation, University College Galway*, 1995.

Background to traveller education

Traveller education in Ireland constitutes a challenging educational context for historic and contemporary reasons of Travellers' educational and social exclusion and also for their continued experiences of prejudice and marginalisation and associated lack of trust and confidence in the education system and in society.

In Ireland, education for Travellers in the past was marked by separate provision and a lack of recognition of Traveller culture. Although policy now supports inclusive and intercultural education, participation rates and outcomes for Travellers remain poor. ... Families and parenting are changing in contemporary society, women's labour force participation has increased and family structures changed. Any effective model of parental involvement must take these issues into account. Involvement can range from token activities to delegated power. We believe that parental involvement should be a partnership process in which all parties contribute for the benefit of the children.

An analysis of Irish state documents shows that a major paradigm shift occurred in the evolution of official views and policies concerning Travellers, and specifically

Traveller education, during the decades from the 1960s to the present, and also demonstrates how past policies and practices continue to have an impact on the present (Boyle et al., 2018). Specifically, the policy of absorption and assimilation evident in early documents was replaced over the years with policies based more on concepts of equality and partnership. In the earlier documents, Travellers were seen as a people in deficit – a community of dropouts and deviants – and their culture was not perceived to have any validity or importance. Later documents demonstrated a growing recognition of Traveller culture and a determination to address issues concerning the education of Travellers in a spirit of interculturalism and inclusion. Policy development in relation to the Traveller community did not occur in a vacuum, rather, various reports were influenced by the dominant perspectives of their time. Certain theoretical perspectives recurred, which were also evident in Irish educational policy generally, *viz* consensualism, essentialism and meritocracy (O'Sullivan, 2005). This evolution in attitudes was matched by parallel developments in State policies. Early assimilationist policies and paternalistic approaches were replaced by concepts of partnership and participation. Nonetheless, a failure to address resourcing implications led ultimately to ethnic-blind policies, resulting in large reductions in education spending targeted at the Traveller community. It was within this context of evolving and shifting policy paradigms in Ireland that Traveller preschools were established.

Background to the Traveller preschools

Traveller preschools were among the initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes for Travellers. These developed in the dual context of government policy about Traveller education in Ireland and the emergence of international research in the 1960s identifying compensatory education approaches for minority and disadvantaged groups. The preschools were set up in the early 1970s by voluntary committees, with financial support from the Department of Education. By 2002, there were 52 Traveller preschools around the country (Department of Education, 2003). The inclusion of Traveller parents in the preschools was a policy focus throughout. A departmental evaluation of the preschools (Department of Education, 2003) recommended that parents of children attending the preschools be elected to management committees, and that each preschool draw up parental involvement policies, in consultation with parents and sensitive to Traveller culture. Traveller support services in Ireland were sorely affected by the economic downturn of the late 2000s, and government funding for Traveller preschools ceased in 2011 (Boyle, Flynn & Hanafin, 2018). This reflected occurrences in other countries where economic cuts mean that children at the margins such as Traveller students suffer most. In the UK, for example, the savage reduction in Traveller education services has been described as one of the most alarming outcomes of austerity politics (Ryder, 2017).

Findings in relation to parental involvement

The main elements of school culture [identified in this research] that facilitated parental involvement were the creation of a warm and welcoming environment, felt recognition of Traveller culture, and good communication practices between school

and home. The second broad theme to emerge in relation to parental involvement in Traveller preschools included the various ways parents were involved directly in school activities: having knowledge, interest and awareness of school activities; assisting in classroom and extra-curricular activities; and (limited) involvement in school decision-making. The parents in this study were aware of the benefits to children of supporting their learning at home, and they undertook a range of activities with them at home. These included talking to children about their day; affirming their efforts; and providing direct curricular support such as listening to their songs and rhymes.

One simple lesson that should transfer to any early years' services policy related to the enrolment of Traveller children, is the need for an inclusive intercultural approach that respects Travellers and has positive regard for their culture. Traveller parents' involvement increased when they felt their culture was recognised and appreciated. Significantly, Traveller parents were able to provide considerable curricular and extra-curricular support for their children both in the school and home settings. Much depended on their feelings of being welcome in the preschools, and the security in what they experienced as the protected enclave represented by the preschools.

Practicing recognition within the school context

A major advantage of the unique Traveller-only setting in this study, therefore, was that it helped us to see clearly two important sets of leadership practices that helped Travellers to feel included in their educational setting, namely recognitive and distributive leadership practices (Devine, 2013; Spillane et al., 2004). The recognitive leadership practices of school managers and teachers included the many ways in which Traveller children, parents and culture were recognised. This study also showed the importance of distributive leadership practices, evident in the many ways in which school leadership extended beyond the role of the principal to include the actions of teachers and others in creating an inclusive environment for a marginalised ethnic community.

This research study showed the importance of teachers' consciousness of being respectful of Travellers and Traveller culture and of this being apparent to parents. As regards the representation of Traveller culture, it was agreed by parents, managers and teachers that Traveller children need to see their reality reflected in classrooms. Any representation of Traveller culture should, however, be based on dialogue with parents, as this is the only way that it can be authentic. Inclusion of minority cultures should be part of an overall strategy of inclusiveness in schools, as issues of recognition and representation differ in integrated services when compared with Traveller-only preschools, which were the focus of this study. There should be positive expectations for all children. It is important that curriculum materials – books, posters and so on – do not stereotype Travellers, nor exoticise them. Practitioners need to ensure that their services do not reflect popular prejudices. They need to recognise that anti-Traveller name-calling is hurtful, and that all bullying and name-calling behaviours need to be tackled.

Services should involve parents to the maximum extent possible. This study showed the willingness of parents to involve themselves when given the opportunity. It is important to develop involvement practices that are meaningful and of benefit to Traveller parents. Services should be warm and welcoming, but it is not enough just to say that there is an open-door policy, as this may be experienced differently by different parents.

Policies for inclusion need to be put in place to ensure that inclusion is not just a token concept. Rather, practices that generate a sense of inclusion should be incorporated into the everyday operation of the school, leading to a visible process that is not one-time but routine. Parental involvement policies need to embrace all parents, and need to recognise that some Traveller parents may be reticent and may need encouragement to become involved.

Learning from the experience of the Traveller Preschools

The inclusion project remains unfinished and conflicting positions prevail about Traveller education. Analyses present it as a 'civilising' agent with an assimilationist intent and equally as a means by which Travellers can achieve equality, greater self-reliance, and hence greater cultural autonomy (Ryder 2017; Foster and Cemlyn 2012). Ryder (2017) argues that the challenge for schools in the 21st century is to offer learning environments that allow Travellers (and other minorities) to maintain their identity, but also to acquire new and adapt old skills. This, he says, is the work of inclusive schooling. A prerequisite for such inclusive schooling is partnership and dialogue, based on recognition and redistribution. Educationally inclusive schools offer new opportunities to pupils who may have experienced previous difficulties, and take account of students' varied life experiences and needs.

Traveller preschools in Ireland provided targeted early years education for children of the Traveller community. With the shift in policy and practice towards integrated settings, such separate provision no longer exists. Integrated settings are often termed inclusive, but such settings do not equal inclusion for all. Segregated settings can teach us something about what inclusion means for minority or marginalised populations. The Traveller preschools are one such example, showing how separate provision generated a sense of inclusion for Travellers, for whom social and educational contexts have long been challenging and alienating. In this paper, lessons are drawn from Traveller preschools that may transfer to mainstream "inclusive" settings.

Practices to support inclusion set out to ensure that people feel that they belong, are engaged and are connected (Agyei, 2016). The success of inclusion practices in this early years education environment was indicated by how positive Travellers were about the preschools, seeing them as being "protected enclaves" where they felt welcomed, accepted and part of the community; where they experienced cultural

value and representation; and where they made meaningful contributions to the school. This sense of inclusion was supported by recognitive and distributive practices, among them intentional representation and valuing of Traveller culture, and warmth, welcome, and respect on the part of teachers and managers as well as enabling Traveller parents to become part of the leadership contingent in Traveller preschools. Travellers' own educational experiences and lack of confidence were barriers to a sense of inclusion and it was not easy for preschools to ensure parental inclusion. Parents, teachers and managers were all supportive of the inclusion of Traveller parents, especially on management committees, but they pointed out various obstacles to achieving this.

Nonetheless, overall, Traveller parents reported that the culture and environment of the preschools facilitated their inclusion in this distinctive educational setting. In giving voice to what Traveller parents, and teachers and managers in Traveller preschools in Ireland have to say about practices that support inclusion, it is hoped that parallels may be drawn that are helpful for [others].

Concluding remarks

The excerpts provided above, give a brief overview of some of the insights offered by study of the Traveller preschools. While the focus of policy has shifted from separate provision to integration, we can see some of the ways in which a 'safe enclave' provided some benefits to those who had been alienated by the majority system, and the manner in which a Traveller-majority school might relate to issues of Traveller culture in a different way to an integrated setting, where Travellers will often (though not always) be in the minority.

The excerpts include some recommendations, aimed at teachers, educational leaders, and policy-makers, but I repeat some broad points here:

- Formal integration of service provision needs to be matched by a culture of inclusion, respect, and dialogue.
- The educational system should include Traveller culture in a manner that is respectful, avoids exoticisation, and that is grounded in ongoing dialogue with Travellers themselves. Traveller children need to 'see' themselves and their culture.
- While the experiences of the community are becoming more varied, many Traveller parents will have limited formal education, or have been alienated from the system by their experiences. While this is not unique to Travellers, it does make it particularly important for this community that opportunities for parental involvement be structured in ways that foster inclusion of these parents.
- In an integrated setting, it becomes statistically unlikely that representatives of minority groups will hold limited positions on Boards of Management. It is important that other structures are identified for identifying, drawing out, and learning from, the distinct perspectives that minority groups, like Travellers, bring.