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Making the invisible visible: managing tensions around including Traveller culture and history in the curriculum at primary and post-primary levels

Anne Marie Kavanagh * and Maeve Dupont 

School of Human Development, DCU Institute of Education, DCU, Dublin, Ireland

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The formal recognition of Travellers as a distinct ethnic group by the Irish State in 2017 was arguably a significant step towards redressing the pernicious and endemic institutional racism and marginalisation that Travellers have historically experienced in Ireland. It was announced by the Irish Government in October 2018 that a review of the place of Travellers in existing school curricula would be undertaken, with a view to including Traveller history and culture at primary and post-primary levels. While there are benefits associated with curricular recognition, including its capacity to potentially disrupt the reiterative reproduction of institutional racism at a formal curricular level, a significant body of literature highlights the shortcomings associated with additive curricular approaches. These include tokenism and a failure to challenge dominant mainstream-centric perspectives and wider systemic inequities. The potential for curricular interventions to obscure or side-line critical consideration of the role of teachers' and student teachers' subjectivities, privileges and biases in perpetuating inequities is another dimension of this critique. This article draws on critical social justice literature, including tools from Critical Whiteness studies, to critically explore anti-Traveller racism and to analyse the tensions inherent in including Traveller culture and history in Irish primary and post-primary curricula.

Keywords: Travellers; curriculum; racism; whiteness; teacher education

Introduction

After almost five decades of resolute lobbying, strategic alliance-building and sustained agitation for change, the Traveller¹ Community became recognised as a distinct ethnic group by the Irish State in March 2017 (Houses of the Oireachtas 2017). This was a significant and historic development, not least because of the Irish State's long-standing (and internationally criticised) resistance to this recognition. The Traveller Community are an ethnic minority group indigenous to the island of Ireland, numbering 30,987 according to Census 2016 (CSO 2018). Members share a common history, language and cultural heritage. Although

*Corresponding author. Email: Annemarie.kavanagh@dcu.ie

nomadism was an integral part of Traveller culture historically, it has declined significantly in recent years (Harmon 2015). This is in part a consequence of structural barriers, such as The Trespass Act (2002), which make it illegal for Travellers to reside in unofficial halting sites, thereby essentially criminalising nomadism (McGuire 2020). Such legislation and other attempts to assimilate Travellers are described by Kitching (2015) as a form ‘cultural genocide’ (178).

Travellers have a long history of resistance and activism with individual Travellers and Traveller organisations providing powerful platforms for Travellers to agitate for their rights (Joyce 2018). While it was ultimately suppressed by the Irish State, Traveller efforts to self-educate by establishing their own schools in the 1960s is a notable example of Traveller agency and activism (Kitching 2015). Indeed, it was following lobbying by Traveller organisations that the Irish State set up a Task Force on the Traveller Community in 1993. This was the first time that Traveller organisations had been on any committee set up to decide on Traveller issues. Since that time, Traveller organisations have: developed their own policies; conducted research to highlight particular issues for Travellers; made hundreds of written submissions to government departments on issues affecting Travellers; developed intercultural education and leadership programmes; and taken to the streets to demonstrate their support or opposition on important issues (Fay and McCabe 2015). Recognising the soft power wielded by international organisations such as the United Nations’ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Traveller organisations shrewdly secured their support and harnessed the discourse of rights to argue for recognition of their ethnicity (Haynes, Joyce, and Schweppe 2021). While recognition conferred no new rights on Travellers, in an education context, it provided a context for and acted as an impetus to the introduction of the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018, which forms the basis of this article.

While a recent Council of Europe report states that Irish society is becoming increasingly tolerant, it, in line with other research publications, demonstrates that Travellers continue to experience acute disadvantage in the areas of education, housing, employment and health, indicating evidence of pervasive structural and institutional oppression (AITHS 2010; McGaughey 2011; Watson, Kenny, and McGinnity 2017). In education, as will be discussed in this article, evidence of systemic institutional anti-Traveller racism ranges from high illiteracy levels, to academic underachievement to monocultural school policies, practices and curricula, which exclude Travellers and de-legitimise their distinct culture. Tools from Critical Whiteness scholarship will be used to theorise Travellers’ subaltern positionality and experiences of racism. In this context, we understand whiteness to be ‘a dominant identity in which formations and boundaries of whiteness have specific cultural and economic forms of domination which reinforce the position of privilege’ (Bhopal 2018, 18). As will be argued, the ideology and practice of whiteness normalises (certain types of) white racial identity, thereby conferring invisible (to white people) advantages and unearned privileges upon white middle-class elites (Bhopal 2018). This, in turn, disadvantages minoritised groups such as Travellers. Indeed, it is the aforementioned privilege of the settled, middle-class community which enables us to work in teacher education and to write this article. Unlike Travellers, we are neither racialised as inferior nor do we experience racial disadvantage on the basis of our culture. We recognise our complicity in perpetuating settled privilege and our inability to understand the devastating impact of racism on Travellers’ lives. To address our

shortcomings, we strive to be reflexive about our positionality and in writing this article, to in some small way, demonstrate our commitment to working in coalition with members of the Traveller Community to challenge racism in its various guises.

In this context, this article provides an exploration of the racism experienced by Travellers in Ireland; outlines the reasons for the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018 along with its anticipated benefits; and draws on critical social justice literature, to critically analyse the tensions inherent in including Traveller culture and history in Irish primary and post-primary curricula.

Travellers' experiences of racism

As will be explored in the sections which follow, the literature indicates that Travellers experience structural, institutional and interpersonal racisms. This racial discrimination is grounded in racist ideologies and discourses, such as whiteness, which are propagated and perpetuated by public and policy discourses, everyday school practices and structures (including the mis- and non-recognition of Travellers in school curricula) and traditional and social media platforms (Bhopal 2018). Reflecting this, we will now briefly locate anti-Traveller racism within a broader historical context of anti-Irish racism, in the process demonstrating that whiteness as an identity changes over time (Bhopal 2018).

The historical roots of systemic racism in Ireland lie in the racialisation of the Irish as Other within British colonial discourse in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Kitching 2014). This racialisation was necessary in order to advance British imperial capitalism. Recognising the necessity of land enclosure and a sedentary population to this iniquitous economic model, the British criminalised a 'loose attachment to land' through the introduction of anti-vagrancy legislation (Kitching 2014, 25–26). Mobilised as an organising principle, religion was used to categorise people into proto-racial hierarchies. Constructed in binary opposition to Protestantism (which signified moral superiority, civility and progress), Catholicism became a key ground on which Irish people were constituted as backward, uncivilised and socially and morally deficient (Kitching 2014). This in turn was used to justify their dispossession, oppression and impoverishment.

The 'relative whitening' (Kitching 2015, 171) of the Irish in Ireland began during the nineteenth century. It did not however extend to members of the Traveller Community who were considered a 'non-acceptable ... shade[s] of whiteness' (Bhopal 2018, 29). As Irish sedentary society moved towards capitalism and landownership became individualised rather than collective, Travellers continued to be nomadic opting not to conform to settled white ways of being and acting in the world (Kitching 2014). As a consequence, they were inferiorised and demonised as backward outsiders '... who worked against Irish society ...' (Kitching 2014, 38). The fundamentals of the race ideology which underpinned these historical constructions persist to this day. Whiteness as an ideology and organising principle continues to abnormalise Travellers, positioning them as inferior to settled people. Its underpinning race ideology is mobilised to explain the inevitability of inequitable outcomes for Travellers.

White privilege, which is 'the expression of whiteness through the maintenance of power, resources, accolades and systems of support' is made real by institutional structures, social arrangements and the (mostly unconscious) actions of a range of

societal actors, including journalists, politicians, teachers and students (Bhopal 2018, 19). Reflecting this, the following section outlines these actors' roles in reinforcing racist discourses, which are then taken up by the wider settled community. This provides a context for exploring the racial discrimination experienced by Travellers.

Racist discourses in the media

As a social institution, the media plays a significant role in constructing representations of various societal groups and in reinforcing and legitimising dominant racist discourses about Travellers and other minoritised groups (Bhopal 2018). Given the marginalisation and isolation experienced by Travellers, a relatively small number of settled people have personal contact with them. Indeed, in a study of 118 primary school children, Dupont (2017) found that 100 participants had never met a Traveller and 35 had never heard of Travellers. The most frequently cited source of information regarding the Traveller Community was television, reflecting research by Dixon and Rosenbaum (2004) which suggests that dominant groups have more contact with minoritised groups through mass media than through face to face contact.

Research analysing media portrayals of Travellers indicates the promotion of popular stereotypical images of Travellers linked to crime, violence, indecency, untrustworthiness, vulgarity, uncouthness and a recurrent discourse of Travellers as a problematic minority group (Bhopal 2018; Cihan Koca-Helvaci 2016; Vázquez de la Torre Castillo 2012). These pathologising representations reinforce racist tropes about Travellers, further fuelling racism. They also highlight the intersectionality of racial and social class identities and the unacceptability of the whiteness associated with Travellers (Bhopal 2018).

Racist discourse on social media platforms

Along with more traditional media, the advent of social media has provided another forum for perpetuating negative stereotypes and racist discourses about Travellers and other minoritised groups and shaping the attitudes of the settled public (Siapera, Moreo, and Zhou 2018; Twomey 2017). Reflecting this, Twomey (2017) cites several examples of how Facebook (a social networking website) was used to incite hatred against Travellers. Similarly, an analysis of over 6,000 entries from social networking sites Facebook and Twitter revealed evidence of discourses stereotyping, denigrating, demonising and dehumanising Travellers (Siapera, Moreo, and Zhou 2018). As illustrated by Twomey (2017), hate speech (expressed online) can lead to discrimination. A failure to protect marginalised groups, such as Travellers, through structures such as legislation, in this case, the lack of applicable hate crime legislation in the Republic of Ireland, is symptomatic of the structural and institutional racism that Travellers' experience.

Travellers, prejudice and interpersonal racism

Pathologising discourses about Travellers, propagated by the media, perpetuate and validate the racism which Travellers experience (Bhopal 2018). These discourses

stem from a wider culture, which assumes that everyone has access to white middle-class social and cultural capital, and presents the cultures of minoritised groups like Travellers as inferior and deviant. Travellers' refusal to conform to society's expectations, particularly their refusal to assimilate, in addition to perceived cultural differences, including, lifestyle, dress and modes of speech, lead to their positioning as an unacceptable shade of whiteness, which in turn is used to justify racist name-calling and exclusion in schools and wider urban spaces (Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela 2004; Joyce 2018; Lodge and Lynch 2004).

Reflecting this, most settled people in Ireland do not want to live near or socialise with Travellers and holding negative attitudes towards Travellers is considered socially acceptable (Lodge and Lynch 2004; MacGréil 2010; Tormey and Gleeson 2012). In an education context, research by Lodge and Lynch (2004) identified that connecting with a Traveller was thought to result in social rejection. Similarly, research shows that Travellers experience lower levels of belonging and higher levels of negative stereotyping, exclusion and bullying specifically as a result of their ethnic identity (Biggart, O'Hare, and Connolly 2013; Bloomer, Hamilton, and Potter 2014; Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela 2004, 2008). This racial discrimination, in addition to Traveller parents' previous experiences of schooling, helps to explain high levels of Traveller parental anxiety and Traveller children hiding their ethnic identities from peers (Boyle, Hanafin, and Flynn 2018; Devine, Kenny, and MacNeela 2004). Research shows that 62% of Travellers feel that they had been discriminated against in school (AITHS 2010) and when compared to majority group children, Traveller children (aged 10–17) were more likely to report that they were bullied at school (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2012).

These experiences are reflected in wider society. Recent research by Joyce (2018) found that the most frequent forms of racism and discrimination cited by 48 participants (aged 14 and 21) included: racial slurs when passing through urban spaces, refusal of access, being followed around by employees of commercial organisations, and being stopped and searched by police officers without cause. Ingrained anti-Traveller prejudice was manifestly evident following the tragic event in October 2015 when 10 Travellers lost their lives during a fire at an overcrowded halting site in Dublin. Due to strong opposition from local residents, the council had to abandon plans to provide emergency accommodation for the survivors in said residents' neighbourhood. An *Irish Times* newspaper online poll indicated that 72% of 4,800 readers indicated that the residents were correct to protest against the temporary accommodation (McGreevy 2015). This is a powerful example of how whiteness operates to privilege white middle-class elites and disadvantage those of white racial identities who simply aren't white enough. More broadly, these experiences of discrimination help to explain the frequent mental distress, substance abuse and high suicides rates which plague members of the Traveller Community (AITHS 2010; McGorrian et al. 2013; O'Mahony 2017; Van Hout 2010).

Thus far, some experiences of racial discrimination towards Travellers have been outlined. Next, we will explore experiences which specifically relate to the school context and assess the implications for Traveller attainment, attendance and school completion. Underpinning this analysis, will be the perspective that wider racist discourses play out in school relationships between teachers and students.

Educational attainment

According to Weir et al. (2011), there is a significant difference in attainment in reading and mathematics between Traveller children and their settled peers, with the gap emerging as early as primary school. While a range of factors contribute to this disparity, research on minoritised groups suggests that teachers' attitudes and expectations play an important role, specifically their acceptance of the achievement gap as normal and some teachers' preference for allocating blame for underachievement to minoritised children themselves (Mampaey and Zanoni 2016; Vaught and Castagno 2008). The problem, however, is not with Traveller children but with the unequal power relations that exist between the Traveller and settled communities. Acceptance of this achievement gap as a normal and expected outcome by teachers is also illustrative of how teachers' attitudes are shaped by wider racist discourse about Travellers.

School attendance

The last publicly available data on school attendance of Traveller students in the Republic of Ireland reveal high levels of absenteeism. According to the survey of Traveller education and provision, Traveller children who are housed miss an average of 32 school days every year and those living in unofficial halting sites miss an average of 57 days (DES 2005). Similarly, Darmody, Smyth, and McCoy (2008) report that young people from the Traveller Community had the highest absence rates of all the social groups. However, research in other contexts acknowledges that students who were bullied or treated unfairly at school because of their ethnic status were more likely to miss school without permission (Prout and Biddle 2017).

School completion

With regard to school completion, the available evidence suggests that the Traveller Community become increasingly alienated and disengaged from the education system as they get older. Only 8% of Traveller children complete secondary education in comparison with 73% of the general population (Watson, Kenny, and McGinnity 2017). Sixty-three percent of Traveller children have completed their formal education by the age of 16 and less than 1% of Travellers go on to third level education (Watson, Kenny, and McGinnity 2017). While there has been an increase in the number of Travellers who attained a third level qualification between the 2011 and 2016 censuses, the educational attainment of Travellers is still disproportionately lower than the general population at every level (CSO 2017).

According to Watson, Kenny, and McGinnity (2017), Traveller children and teenagers experience discrimination within the school environment which may precipitate early school leaving. In addition, research with second level students, early school leavers and Traveller parents (reflecting on their experiences of education in the 1980s and 1990s) reveals several factors influencing decisions with regard to school completion. Specifically, Travellers identify: discrimination by teachers, bullying and name-calling, peer pressure, feeling isolated, low teacher expectations, and differences between the social and family lives of Traveller and settled children as factors contributing to their decision to leave school early (Bhopal 2018; Boyle, Hanafin, and Flynn 2018; Byrne and Smyth 2010). It is also relevant that research shows

that racism perpetuated against Travellers in school contexts is often downplayed or ignored (Bhopal 2018). This is possibly due to Travellers' white racial identity and teachers therefore failing to see bullying as being racially motivated.

Ameliorating issues of school attendance, completion and attainment is additionally challenging in the context of financial cuts to Traveller-specific education supports. Kitching (2014) describes the disproportionate reduction in spending on Traveller education by the Irish State following the financial crisis of 2008–2014 as a form of 'wilful racism' (172).

The next section explores cultural and curricular non-recognition and misrecognition as forms of institutional racism. This is followed by a critical interrogation of The Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018.

The curriculum and institutional racism

Institutional racism in the form of cultural and curricular non-recognition and misrecognition has long been a feature of the Irish education system (Bryan 2007). Consecutive iterations of Irish curricula and curricular resources have legitimised the voices and perspectives of the dominant settled community, while simultaneously silencing and rendering Traveller knowledge, perspectives and histories invisible (McGaughey 2011; Titley 2009). This type of erasure and hegemonic curricular 'masterscript[ing]' (Swartz 1992, 341) is evident across geo-political contexts, where minoritised groups' cultures, histories, home worlds and languages are either completely omitted ('invisibilising knowledge') from curricula or misrepresented and depoliticised ('marginalising knowledge') (King 2004, 361–362). As is widely accepted, curricula communicate important messages to students, particularly minoritised students. In Nieto's (2004) words, it 'lets students know whether the knowledge they and their communities value has prestige within the educational establishment' (102). The exclusion of Travellers' history and culture from Irish curricula perpetuates cultural racism and related unequal power relations between members of the settled and Traveller communities.

We contend, that the introduction of the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018, which proposes that Traveller culture and history should be taught in Irish schools, disrupts the normalisation and hegemony of white middle-class settled culture in Irish curricula, thereby challenging the ideology of whiteness and the advantages which monocultural curricula bestow upon white elites. We will now explore the Bill.

The Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018

The proposal for a Bill to seek to address the pernicious and injurious relationship between Travellers and the Irish education system emerged following consultation between Traveller organisations, individual Traveller voices and advocates, academics, and members of the Oireachtas (Irish parliament). This dialogue culminated in the introduction of the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018 by then Oireachtas member, Senator Colette Kelleher. The introduction of a Bill that addressed curricular inclusion was in line with the equality and education policies developed by recent governments, including the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021 (Department of Justice 2017), as well as with Ireland's international

obligations, including recommendations from the Committee of Ministers to member States on the inclusion of the history of Roma and/or Travellers in school curricula and teaching materials (CoE 2020).

Based on analysis of Senator Kelleher's address to the upper house of the Irish Parliament (Seanad Éireann) at the second stage of the Bill's debate in July 2018, we observed three primary arguments made in favour of the Bill. These include the Bill's capacity, to foster recognition and validation of Travellers' distinct culture, to redress disadvantage through improving educational attainment and retention and to fight discrimination by countering discriminatory attitudes (Houses of the Oireachtas 2018). Drawing on national and international critical social justice research, the following section outlines and engages critically with these three primary arguments.

Recognition and validation of Travellers' distinct culture?

Research indicates that Travellers highly value and are immensely proud of their distinct identity and culture (Boyle, Hanafin, and Flynn 2018). In her address to Seanad Éireann, Senator Kelleher argued that the uniqueness of Traveller culture had led to academic interest in disciplines such as anthropology and folklore studies and therefore inclusion of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum would help to recognise and validate Travellers' distinct culture and enable students and teachers to learn about Ireland's diverse cultural heritage (Houses of the Oireachtas 2018). She also asserted that learning about Travellers' fight for inclusion and dignity would broaden the cultural and historical education of Irish students in the way Black History Month has for students in the UK and the US (Houses of the Oireachtas 2018). These types of arguments are common in the multi- and inter-cultural education literature. Parekh (2006) maintains that multicultural education 'challenges the falsehoods of ... history, brings out its complexity and plural narratives ...' and helps students to accept 'the diversity of values, beliefs, ways of life and views of the world as an integral part of the human condition' (226–230). In this context, the inclusion of Traveller history and culture would enable students to explore the previously silenced contributions of Travellers to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development. In doing so, it would challenge the uncontested hegemonic narrative of previous curricular iterations. It would also enable students from the majority population to gain an understanding and appreciation of the contributions made by the Traveller Community to wider Irish society, which in turn would support feelings of self-worth and belonging (Harmon 2015). Supporting this, in the British context, Bhopal (2011) argues that, 'If the school curriculum is inclusive of the culture of Gypsy and Traveller groups, this will foster an ethos in which children and teachers will understand and respect the culture of these groups' (317). However, she emphasises that this must be accompanied by robust anti-racism policies and practices.

While there have been curricular efforts to incorporate knowledge about various minority groups in Irish society (including Travellers) with a view to enhancing understanding and appreciation for diversity, research shows that when Traveller identity is visible, it tends to be represented negatively (McGaughey 2011). Indeed, Bryan (2007) cites evidence suggesting that some curricular interventions inadvertently re-inscribe negative attitudes towards Travellers. Based on her analysis of content about Travellers in Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) textbooks (designed for use with

lower second level students in the Republic of Ireland), Bryan presents several examples where Traveller oppression is represented as something that is perceived to exist by Travellers alone. She critiques, what she perceives to be one textbook's explanations of discrimination against Travellers, as 'benevolent yet misguided "attitude[s]"' on the part of settled people, thus excusing to some extent, the marginalisation experienced by Travellers (250). She further critiques the implication that it is members of the settled community (and not state institutions) that are solely responsible for the oppression and exclusion of Travellers. While Bryan commends a number of resources that acknowledge the existence of institutional racism, she critiques their tendency to explain it in terms of the failure of a single institution or organisation. Furthermore, she argues that social institutions are positioned as passively rather than actively engaging in practices which have racist outcomes. She maintains that the way in which Travellers are represented (as lawless, irresponsible and a threat to the dominant community) minimises the extent to which one might feel empathy towards them, concluding that the knowledge being provided about Travellers in particular 'is perhaps more likely to reproduce rather than contest racist ideologies' (256).

In addition, the notion that culture is a static and unidimensional entity that can be learned about and understood by exploring cultural artefacts receives considerable criticism in the literature. Critics maintain that such narrow conceptualisations of culture essentialise cultural groups, ignoring their histories, complexities, hybrid and dynamic natures (Ladson-Billings 2014; May and Sleeter 2010; Nieto 2004). Given the fluidity of culture and the heterogeneity of the Traveller population, avoiding content in the proposed curricula which presents monolithic understanding of what it means to be a Traveller will be a complex task. Another challenge will be to avoid dominant mainstream-centric perspectives of Travellers. One way in which these issues can be addressed is by taking account of the lived experiences of the current generation of Traveller students, which will differ from those of their parents and grandparents. Another, is for the curricula to address the role of racism, particularly institutional racism in shaping Travellers' life experiences. A third, is to enable Travellers to play a central role in the developing and implementing the curricula (and in curricula in general going forward). Traveller knowledge, understandings, histories and cultural experiences must be seen as the legitimate and authoritative source on Traveller culture and history. In this context, the curriculum offers the opportunity to challenge existing asymmetrical power relations, to change the narrative on Travellers and for the first time to acknowledge the enormous contribution of Travellers to our shared Irish culture and history, from their activism and role in the 1916 Rising and world wars to contributions to Irish music and folklore (McGuire 2020).

Improved educational attainment and retention?

Drawing upon research with Maori students in the New Zealand context, Senator Kelleher argued that recognising and validating a minority culture within a school curriculum could contribute to improved educational attainment and retention rates of minority students (Houses of the Oireachtas 2018). Indeed, the Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community (Department of the Environment 1995) cites the disregard for nomadic traditions as a significant factor in discouraging

young Travellers from actively engaging and continuing with schooling. While the non-empirical literature indicates that the issue of representation and curricular inclusion are important and significant, the empirical research which demonstrates that this is the case is quite limited. However, there are a small number of studies conducted in New Zealand and the US, which demonstrate that the teaching of a culturally sustaining curriculum implemented in an inclusive, supportive school context can have positive benefits for marginalised groups. These include positive effects on marginalised groups' confidence and sense of identity and belonging and correlates strongly with increased attendance rates, academic engagement, academic attainment and retention rates (Alton-Lee 2015; Dee and Penner 2016). However, this curricular inclusion must be part of a wider matrix of factors, with the research showing that positive student-teacher relationships is one of the most significant factors. This also points to the need for the proposed curricula to address appropriate pedagogies and pedagogic relations as well as content.

Consideration of a culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogy (CRP/CSP), which is an inclusive teaching approach which foregrounds equity and justice, might be appropriate in this context (Ladson-Billings 2014). CSP/CRP requires teachers to, have high expectations for all students and to challenge them intellectually, to draw on students' lived experiences and knowledge, foster pride in students' own culture and understanding of the cultures of others and develop students' socio-political consciousness by teaching them how to apply the knowledge and critical thinking skills learned in the classroom to real life contexts. However, research shows that the process of faithfully translating this type of pedagogy into practice is complex and challenging for white teachers, and consequently, often takes the form of surface level, tokenistic, additive curricular approaches which do little to promote educational equity (Martin, Pirbhai-Illich, and Pete 2017). Martin, Pirbhai-Illich, and Peten (2017) argue that, in part, this is because CSP is 'unintelligible' to white teachers (236). They cite a range of reasons for this unintelligibility, including CRP's focus on the Other, which enables teachers to avoid engagement with their privilege and the hegemony of settled ways of being and knowing. Critical consideration would therefore have to be given to how the shortcomings of CRP could be avoided in the proposed new curricula. Providing opportunities for teachers to engage critically and reflexively with their prejudices, positionality and settled privilege is one important way of addressing CRP's deficiencies. This will be discussed later in the article.

Counter discriminatory attitudes and negative myths?

Thirdly, Senator Kelleher argued that the inclusion of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum would help to counter the discriminatory attitudes and negative myths that exist about the Traveller Community (Houses of the Oireachtas 2018). Senator Kelleher drew on the seminal work of psychologist William Ryan (1976), and his concept of victim blaming in particular, to explain the source of negative myths about the Traveller community. She argued that in an Irish context, members of the settled community see aspects of the social life of Travellers (that are due to poverty and marginalisation) as essential features of their culture and 'use this observation to justify racist attitudes that cause the cycle of poverty, exclusion and marginalisation to continue' (Houses of the Oireachtas 2018, para. 8).

As has been addressed earlier in this article, the negative implications of the stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination experienced by Travellers are significant. The assertion that this proposed curriculum could ‘counter discriminatory attitudes and negative myths’ and indirectly challenge racist attitudes very much depends on the approach that the curriculum takes.

In terms of addressing prejudice, there is evidence in the Irish context to suggest that school- and curriculum- based interventions can make a difference. The Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) established The Yellow Flag Programme as part of its activist approach to drive institutional change. Overseen and managed by the ITM, it offers extremely valuable insights into how to challenge prejudice and discrimination, and, promote inclusion, respect for diverse identities and anti-racism (Titley 2009). Research shows that its approach to anti-racism and intercultural practice has been highly successful in the primary and post-primary schools in which it operates (Titley 2009). Part of this approach is the inclusion of a range of stakeholders, including students, staff, management, parents and wider community groups. This, combined with the promotion of socio-political consciousness, helps to take learning beyond the school walls and provides a context for children to use the knowledge and skills that they have developed and apply them to real-world problems. Its foregrounding of anti-racism training reflects wider research which shows the necessity of challenging racist attitudes and individual and institutionally racist practices. Without this type of anti-racism training for teachers and student teachers and a fundamental change in the way that Travellers are positioned in teacher and wider societal discourse, it would be unrealistic to expect that the proposed new curricula could achieve meaningful inclusion. The next section argues for the need for teachers to engage with their settled white privilege as an essential pre-requisite to the implementation of the proposed curricula.

Teacher education, whiteness and the perpetuation of institutional racism

As argued, the literature indicates that school structures, including monocultural curricula and pedagogical approaches and teachers’ negative attitudes, assumptions and low expectations for children from minoritised backgrounds reproduce institutional racism (Bhopal 2011; Mampaey and Zanoni 2016; Vaught and Castagno 2008). Given teachers’ positioning and relative autonomy, they have the capacity to either reinforce or challenge racism. Our identities and positionality, which are shaped by our previous life experiences, impact our negotiation and engagement with the formal and hidden curriculum. Teacher education has a key role to play in this context and is a key component of the structural change that needs to take place. A first step within teacher education programmes therefore must be awareness raising and opportunities for student teachers to interrogate their own settled, middle-class white privilege, the prejudices they hold about minoritised groups and the dominant discourses that shape their views. Student teachers, however, should not be made to feel as though their attitudes and practices are solely responsible for structural issues such as the achievement gap (Vaught and Castagno 2008). As argued by Vaught and Castagno, while individual teachers must confront their privilege, deficit understandings of difference and the role that they play in reproducing inequities, they must also understand that their attitudes and practices are reflective of wider structures and discourses, which need to be transformed.

While the process of engaging in reflexivity and gaining self and structural awareness is highly complex and can elicit uncomfortable feelings for teachers including guilt, shame, defensiveness and anger, it is essential (Picower 2009; Martin, Pirbhai-Illich, and Pete 2017; Vaught and Castagno 2008). Research shows that part of the challenge in engaging in this type of work is white teachers' struggle to recognise that they have a racial identity and that this white settled identity confers them with a range of privileges (Picower 2009; Martin, Pirbhai-Illich, and Pete 2017). As previously argued, the taken-for-granted nature of so many white settled practices from which teacher accrue privileges, renders them invisible.

Engaging in reflexive work offers teachers an opportunity to challenge the supremacy of hegemonic ways of knowing and doing things. If Traveller children were seen as active agents in the classroom possessing valid and valuable experiences and knowledge, as is argued by Ladson-Billings in the context of African American students, it would reposition Travellers as subjects that teachers and other children can learn from, rather than just about (Ladson-Billings 2014). This would help to challenge deficit understandings of Traveller knowledge systems, which would in turn undermine the unequal power relations which sustain institutional racism. Creating space for reflexivity within school structures would additionally provide opportunities for teachers to collectively engage in critical analysis of the role of school and classroom practices in perpetuating racism. It would also provide opportunities for teachers to re-imagine their relationships with the other. As is argued by Ladson-Billings (2014), it is imperative for teachers to connect with and build strong relationships with students, parents and the wider community.

Without this type of critical work, it is likely that curricular additions will have little impact. Indeed, scholars such as Bryan (2008) argue that such interventions can act as smokescreens which obfuscate and distract from the need to address larger structural issues, which may challenge the status quo. One area which has been addressed to some degree in recent years has been access for minoritised groups to higher education. Research shows that Travellers are significantly under-represented in teacher education programmes (Darmody and Smyth 2016). Strand 1 of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) addresses this issue (Higher Education Authority n.d.). While such compensatory schemes are limited in their capacity to tackle a long legacy of structural and institutional racism, they are one component of the wider structural change that needs to take place.

The next section outlines the current status of the Bill.

Current status of the Bill

The Bill is currently (May 2021) at its second stage before the lower house of the Irish parliament, Dáil Éireann. Since its introduction in the upper house (Seanad Éireann), the place of Travellers in current curricula has been audited by the State's National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, signalling progress. However, the Bill has not fared well since its introduction to parliament. Amendments proposed by the Minister for Education and Skills seek to remove the curriculum's proposed statutory footing thereby erasing the mandatory requirement for schools to teach about Traveller culture and history. Schools therefore only have to 'promote a knowledge and understanding of the culture and history of the Traveller community' (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019, para.18). The removal of the legal requirement to teach about

Traveller culture and history radically undermines the Bill's capacity to promote mutual understanding and challenge institutional and interpersonal racisms, as the level of engagement with the curriculum is at the discretion of schools and previous research shows little or no engagement with non-statutory curricular interventions, e.g. The Intercultural Education Guidelines (Kavanagh 2013). The garrotting of the Bill is perhaps another example of how settled white privilege is preserved and how minoritised groups such as Travellers continue to be marginalised by the institutions of the state.

Conclusion

The challenges associated with making the invisibility of Traveller culture and history visible in primary and post-primary school curricula are significant. The proposed curricula have the capacity to address the mis- and non-recognition of Traveller culture and history evident in current curricular iterations. They also have the capacity to disrupt and challenge the historical subjugation and silencing of Traveller voices, norms and values. In this context, there is scope for it to disrupt the reiterative reproduction of institutional racism, at least at the level of the formal curriculum. However, as argued, it is the hidden curriculum which requires the most serious attention, particularly the attitudes and actions (or inactions) of teachers and the institutionally racist policies which both inform and reflect them. Traveller-led programmes such as The Yellow Flag Programme offer important insights into how prejudice and racism can be tackled and learnings from such programmes should inform the proposed curricula. While any initiative which seeks to give voice and representation to a marginalised community is welcome and important, even if the above challenges are addressed, the proposed curricula must be seen as just one component of a more comprehensive strategic approach, which is needed to tackle the grave injustices which Travellers experience in accessing their basic human rights.

Note

1. We use the term 'Traveller' in this article as it is the term used in Irish equality legislation and in the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill which we are discussing in this article, however, we recognise that many in the Traveller Community use and prefer the term 'Mincéir'.

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Notes on contributors

Anne Marie Kavanagh, PhD, is Assistant Professor in Ethical and Intercultural Education in the School of Human Development at DCU Institute of Education, Dublin City University.

Maeve Dupont, PhD, is Assistant Professor in Psychology in the School of Human Development at DCU Institute of Education, Dublin City University.

ORCID

Anne Marie Kavanagh  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6962-452X>

Maeve Dupont  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2463-250X>

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