13 'No One Sees a Traveller at the Top of the Class'

Experiences of Irish Travellers on Programmes Supporting Teacher Diversity

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13.1 Introduction and Literature Review

Irish Travellers have a long history on the island of Ireland with their own language (Shelta, Gamon and Cant), culture and traditions that date back to the twelfth century (Giraldus and Dimock 1867). Despite this long-standing history, marginalisation and inequality have been a reality for Irish Travellers (O'Sullivan et al. 2018). Disparities are evident in every echelon of society and are particularly prominent in education, with Travellers described as a "uniquely disadvantaged group" (Mulcahy 2012, p. 311). Although by no means expansive, the literature around Irish Travellers accessing the Irish education system is developing. A few studies report on the lack of a sense of belonging for Travellers in education (Frehill and Dunsmuir 2015) with little awareness and understanding of Traveller culture and history by educators (Watson et al. 2017). Lloyd and Stead (2001) describe this lack of understanding as a 'denial of difference', wherein educators fail to recognise or accept aspects of Traveller culture.

Such denial of cultural differences and of multigenerational discrimination can impact Travellers' motivation to stay in education and is linked to extremely limited progression into the labour force (Oireachtas 2020). It also has a knock-on effect on Travellers' capacity to access and progress through higher education (HE), and out of a population of 30,987, only 167 hold a third-level qualification (Central Statistics Office [CSO] 2017). Additionally, there is a significant under-representation of Travellers in initial teacher education (ITE) (Keane and Heinz 2015). Issues of disclosure are likely to be important in interpreting the data around progression of Travellers to HE and ITE (Keane and Heinz 2015). One consequence of ongoing racism and discrimination is the likelihood that many Travellers may choose to conceal their Traveller identity due to fear of discrimination and exclusion (D'Arcy 2014).

The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019 (hereafter, National Access Plan [NAP]) (Higher Education Authority [HEA] 2015) makes firm commitments to increase Traveller participation rates in HE. Some progress has been made in this regard with the progress review of the NAP (HEA 2018) showing that the number of Irish Travellers accessing HE has increased from 35 (2012/2013) to 61 (2017/2018). While the review acknowledges that more needs to be done, it is clear that Traveller educational ambition

is growing with an emerging group of Irish Traveller scholars contributing to national policy and research discourses (Crickley and Kenny 2020).

As part of the realisation of the NAP (HEA 2015), the PATH1[1] programme was launched, which has the specific aim of addressing the under-representation of certain groups, including Irish Travellers, in ITE. From this platform, Marino Institute of Education's *Tobar* and Maynooth University's *Turn to Teaching* programmes were realised. While both programmes are committed to supporting Travellers through various ITE pathways, there are significant differences in each programme's focus and approaches. *Tobar* provides individualised and longitudinal supports for Irish Travellers in level 8/9 primary ITE programmes. Highly personalised and in-depth guidance-oriented relationships between the programme staff and participants are a central feature of the programme (Colum and Collins 2021). *Turn to Teaching* is a specially designed access course that provides a pedagogic and alternative accreditation pathway into a number of ITE programmes for a range of under-represented groups including, but not exclusively, Irish Travellers. Positioned within an emerging national research focus on diversity in ITE (e.g., Keane and Heinz 2015; Keane et al. 2018) and responsive to the paucity of research into the experiences of Travellers in ITE, this chapter articulates the experiences of five Irish Travellers with respect to accessing, and progressing into, ITE.

13.2 Methodology

This chapter explores five Irish Travellers' journeys into and through the *Tobar* and *Turn to Teaching* programmes. As part of wider and ongoing evaluative and reflexive processes, both programmes sought to explore Traveller participants' perspectives and experiences, and researchers from both programmes collaboratively designed and implemented the study. Ethical approval was granted from both institutions. Participants (see Table 13.1), all of whom were female, were purposefully selected. All Traveller students on the *Tobar* and *Turn to Teaching* programmes were invited, and agreed, to participate in the study.

Shaped by a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives (Connelly and Clandinin 2006), the study adopted a

Table 13.1 Participants' Profiles

Biographical details	Programme	Prior Educational Attainment
Annie[2], female, early twenties	*Tobar* (Professional Master of Education: Primary)	Leaving Certificate
Caroline, female, early thirties	*Tobar* (Professional Master of Education: Primary)	Level 8 Degree
Brenda, female, early twenties	*Tobar* (Professional Master of Education: Primary)	Level 8 Degree
Julie, female, early twenties	*Turn to Teaching* (Primary Teaching Stream)	Further Education, Level 6 Course
Patricia, female, early thirties	*Turn to Teaching* (Secondary Teaching Stream)	University Accredited Level 5 Course

narrative methodological approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants between late 2019 and the summer of 2020. We view(ed) the interviews, to use Holstein and Gubrium's (2011) term, as 'animated' interviews and framed the research encounter as "an actively constructed conversation through which narrative data are produced" (p. 149). Our questions, then, were crafted as narrative prompts to initiate a reflexive dialogic space, which, in turn, would allow us to explore participants' journeys into and through the respective programmes. The interview schedule had two main parts. Part one explored participants' journeys to becoming students on both programmes, with a particular focus on their prior experiences of education. The second part of the interview focused exclusively on their experiences of the respective programmes.

While the three *Tobar* participants were interviewed prior to the pandemic, the two *Turn to Teaching* participants were interviewed during the early months of COVID-19 in Ireland. We were acutely aware that the pandemic had a significant impact on students from under-represented groups in HE, and, in particular, on Irish Travellers (Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, and National Traveller Women's Forum 2020). The research team engaged in critical discussion about the ethics of continuing with the research in this period. A decision was made to continue only after consultation with participants. Data collection methods were adjusted to include e-interviewing techniques via Teams and Zoom, phone calls and, in one case, email (Ravitch 2020). We acknowledge that our findings may have been different if all participants were interviewed prior to COVID-19, as the pandemic undoubtedly raised specific additional issues for those participants.

The interviews were transcribed, and data were thematically analysed by researchers from the respective projects separately. Then, a second analysis and synthesis across all data was conducted to identify common and contrasting themes in the participants' experiences. A thematic approach to analysis was adopted to focus on the narrative content, rather than process or context, and was useful, in particular, to "highlight commonalities and differences across datasets" (Shukla et al. 2014, p. 4). This was appropriate for the inter-institutional nature of the research, but also, given the small numbers involved, this approach helped to avoid ethical issues relating to participant identification associated with a more narrative approach to analysis, which uncovers the specificity of individual stories and their telling.

It is important, we feel, to note the ethical and methodological unease that we, as researchers, felt throughout this research project and that remains somewhat unresolved. As critically reflexive researchers and practitioners, the degree to which we are working 'with' or doing research 'on' Irish Travellers cuts to the heart of this unease; the research we consider here can, we fear, be more easily characterised as the latter. As our two programmes continue to develop, through a process of reflexivity and dialogue with and between ourselves and a wider community of practice including participants and other stakeholders, we look forward to continuing ethical and methodological growth. This growth, we hope, will allow our future research to increasingly adopt and perform the critical and participatory values in which we ground our work (Colum and Collins 2021).

13.3 Findings

The findings present participants' diverse and idiosyncratic journeys into and through programmes supporting diversity in ITE. Even a cursory reading demonstrates the need to resist the tendency, as O'Hanlon and Holmes (2004) observe, to perceive Travellers as a homogeneous group of people. Notwithstanding, there are shared elements to their stories, along the lines of life experience.

13.3.1 Diverse Experiences, Diverse Motivations

Participants' prior teaching and learning experiences had a positive influence on their decisions to become teachers, and these were particularly emphasised by the younger participants (Brenda [Tobar], Julia [TtT], and Annie [Tobar]). Quasi-teaching experiences garnered from minding younger siblings (Brenda, Tobar) and more formalised classroom experiences during transition year (Brenda, Tobar, and Annie, Tobar) and work placements (Julie, TtT, and Caroline, Tobar) supported their identification with teaching. Caroline (Tobar) explained that these experiences helped her to realise that she "loved working with children and felt I could bring a lot to the job as a primary school teacher".

Reflective of their life experience and more circuitous route to ITE than the other participants, Patricia's (TtT) and Caroline's (Tobar) stories are characterised by perseverance, a commitment to make a better life for themselves and their families and, like all the participants, a deep sense of wanting to make a difference. Through the development and accumulation of various personal resources, Patricia (TtT) and Caroline (Tobar) were empowered to plot a less certain trajectory to the one followed by the younger participants. The origins of Patricia's (TtT) teaching aspirations could be traced back to a transformative period of time when she emigrated to seek better employment opportunities and thus "escape a life that I was not willing to age into". During this time, Patricia worked in a community centre, where she bore witness to the damage caused by public servants disregarding the value system of indigenous people while performing their professional duties.

> I realised there was a set of societal factors that created issues for people and families from displaced, undervalued and ostracised communities within the Irish Travelling community, within indigenous communities, and likely in indigenous communities everywhere.

During her time abroad working with indigenous people, Patricia started to make connections between their experiences of displacement and oppression, and the experiences of Irish Travellers. In time, this stimulated her desire to become a values-based educator that would seek to effect social change:

> I think it's important to teach in a way that means something to the students. If I am teaching in a way that disregards the value system of the students, they aren't going to feel that the material applies to them at all. Yes, the value system of the communities needs to be upheld and respected and included in the education of the communities you teach in.

Her vision for social change was imbued with values she views as characteristic of Irish Travellers, namely "respect", "trust in personal interactions" and "standing up for those who need it", amongst others.

Similarly, Caroline's (Tobar) experience of working on a community project on Traveller culture triggered thoughts of wanting to do more to improve the experiences of Travellers in education. Echoing Julie's (TtT) desire "to break the barrier and show other Travellers that it can be done", Caroline (Tobar) felt that teaching would present her with an opportunity to effect real change and help inspire other Travellers to consider teaching as a career:

> No one sees a face like mine, no one sees a Traveller at the top of the class, I felt like we were selling a dream but there is no reality, I wanted to do more and I soon realised I could only do that from 'the inside' … the only way to do this was to become a primary school teacher to make a difference.

These observations not only reveal Patricia's (TtT), Caroline's (Tobar) and Julie's (TtT) social and political criticality, but they also provide an insight into the type of teacher they wished to become. In some cases, however, there was no relationship between participants' positive identification with teaching and its perceived attainability as a career. Prior to finding out about *Turn to Teaching*, feelings of difference, deficit and exclusion dominated Julie's (TtT) and Patricia's (TtT) reflections on the teaching profession:

> I had never considered being a teacher. I always pictured teachers as being someone from the countryside, from a stable nuclear-style family. Someone who enjoyed being in authority, maybe.
>
> (Patricia, TtT)

13.3.2 The Role of Guidance and Support

Some participants referenced strong familial support along their educational journey, epitomised by Julie's reference to the unconditional parental love and support she received, which insulated her from powerful feelings of pressure to 'make it':

> No, I kind of take it in my stride … my parents are very supportive, in the way that 'if that is what you want to do' … if you don't want to do it, like there's no shame in dropping out.
>
> (Julie, TtT)

However, given their lack of family history of HE knowledge and participation, there was an absence of discussion in the home about potential future educational options. Annie (Tobar) stated:

> My family didn't know anything about school, never mind third level education. This meant that I knew nothing about any courses available, different levels and different options available for me.

Additionally, many participants reported that they experienced a lack of academic and career guidance support in post-primary school. This deficit of support and encouragement was reflected in the difficulty participants had accessing information on pathways to teaching:

> Accessing information on teaching programmes was quite difficult. I did not know how I could re-sit my Leaving Cert Irish and maths, what TEG [Irish language proficiency certificate] exam I needed to take and how to apply.
>
> (Caroline, Tobar)

Julie (TtT) felt that teaching was not presented to her as a possible option by her school guidance teacher even though she had stated her interest in exploring it. It was not until Julie progressed to a Further Education (FE) course that she gained access to career guidance that supported her teaching aspirations, with Patricia (TtT) having a similar experience while studying on a level 5 university access course. Julie (TtT) states:

> I was in the PLC [Post Leaving Certificate Course] … I was talking to one of the guidance counsellor women, on what I want to do after this. 'Well, I really want to be a teacher, but that's obviously not an option at all because of the Irish'. She was like, well, you could go the PME [Professional Master in Education] route … Then she called me back a couple of weeks later, and she was like, 'oh, I found this course that you might be interested in, and it was *Turn to Teaching*'.

Access to career guidance at PLC level had unintended consequences, in that as well as identifying a possible pathway to teaching, it also illuminated the significant structural barriers that participants had to overcome to realise their teaching ambitions. Julie (TtT) and Annie (Tobar) identified the high academic entry requirements, including the Irish language competency required, as significant barriers for her and other Travellers. The length of the postgraduate route to primary teaching and the financial resources required for such a sustained course of study militated against Julie (TtT) considering it as a viable option prior to the establishment of *Turn to Teaching*.

   All participants referenced the guidance role played by *Tobar* and *Turn to Teaching* staff in affirming the legitimacy of their teaching aspirations prior to commencing their respective programmes. Annie (Tobar) states:

> *Tobar* was extremely beneficial for me. Without it I wouldn't have been aware that I needed to re-sit my Leaving Certificate maths exam, meaning that I would've been rejected for the PME. I was also provided with grinds for my TEG [Irish language proficiency Certificate] exam which helped me get the results I needed for the PME entry requirements.

13.3.3 Experiences of the Programmes: Developing Confidence and Critical Capacity

Participants spoke of the profound impact that both programmes had had on their lives, their sense of identity and confidence to pursue teaching as a career. A number of participants referenced an emerging sense of self-efficacy with regard to their capacity not only to become teachers, but also to become teachers that seek to challenge structural and institutional discourses of deficit. In many instances, they attributed the development of these motivations to the space both programmes created for participants to engage in transformative discourses and processes and develop their critical literacy and capacities:

> The *Turn to Teaching* programme has done more for me than I could have imagined, before I started. Not only have we learned about teaching, but we have also learned about humanity and how to treat people, how to examine social constructs and the true impact and importance of appreciating diversity—valuing difference rather than tolerating and merely accepting difference.
>
> (Patricia, TtT)

Caroline (Tobar) spoke powerfully of the role *Tobar* played in boosting her self-confidence. It also provided space for her to reflect on her capacity to have achieved more in school, had she had access to adequate educational resources, and had the system been more culturally responsive and appropriate:

> The programme allowed for confidence building because I was slowly but surely unpacking the years of believing I was a failure because of a poor Leaving Cert. Instead, I was able to prove to myself that I could have gotten the Leaving Cert I deserved had I the financial luxury of affording grinds and been in a more culturally sensitive education system.
>
> (Caroline, Tobar)

While Julie (TtT) and Patricia (TtT) spoke positively about the transferable academic skills they developed during the programme, it was more specifically the modules and experiences that engaged directly with pedagogy and school placement that captured their imagination. Both spoke passionately about the guided reflection on school placement and how it contributed to increasing their confidence as emergent educators:

> I definitely want it more now because we did a placement … it just kind of showed a proper school setting, so it is definitely something I want to do more of.
>
> (Julie, TtT)

Patricia (TtT) felt the facilitated mentoring sessions she had with graduates of *Turn to Teaching* provided her with a dialogical space to consider the type of teacher she would like to be:

> Mentoring and speaking to students have benefited them and me. They learned from me, but I learned some invaluable insights from them in open discussions, and that demonstrated to me that the Freire ethos and style of education is where I am going with my approach to education in my career.
>
> (Patricia, TtT)

13.3.4 *Affective and Material Resources and Challenges*

The value placed on the relational (supportive relationships between staff and students) in both programmes and the emotional resources such supports created for participants allowed them to overcome periods of low confidence and self-doubt, as articulated by Patricia (TtT) and Brenda (Tobar):

> Just the fact that I had the extra support there and the fact that I had someone that I could go to, and I had all that extra support is definitely the reason that I ended up staying in the course [PME] and enjoying it as much as I have.
>
> (Brenda, Tobar)

Patricia (TtT) and Caroline (Tobar) referenced the role the staff in the respective programmes played in allaying concerns about having the necessary financial supports in place to ensure that their participation would be a positive one:

> Through *Tobar* I experienced the powerful advantage that comes with money because with financial security comes the luxury of curiosity. My mind was not absorbed by bills that needed paying, instead it was present in the classroom, with the lecturer and in the educational goals I wanted to achieve.
>
> (Caroline, Tobar)

In terms of shared challenges, both Julie (TtT) and Patricia (TtT) cited the move to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic as being particularly difficult. While the programme supported students with access to laptops, poor connectivity, lack of a suitable study space and care responsibilities were factors that added to their collective stress during this time and adversely affected their concentration and motivation.

13.4 Discussion and Conclusion

Participants' stories of their journey to and through ITE are ones of hope, resilience, and resistance and were sustained by a desire to forge meaningful occupational futures in educational work that 'will make a difference'. Finnegan et al. (2019), in their study of students' (from diverse backgrounds) transitions into graduate employment, characterise this occupational desire as the search for "good work",

which, as Keane's (2017) study revealed, can be seen as an orientation towards 'altruistic' work that holds out the possibility for both personal and social transformation.

Participants' emerging sense of their teaching aspirations, which were often ignored, unheard or reoriented to 'more suitable' career paths during previous school-based guidance experiences, were nourished in the *Tobar* and *Turn to Teaching* programmes, whose practices are located in principles and values of dialogue, participation, critical reflexivity, collaboration, and care.

These programmes provided the participants with important spaces to reflect on what Apple (2011) refers to as "the gritty materialities" of their lived experiences and enabled them to further develop an already strong critical literacy to challenge the deficit ideology that often positions them, and students from under-represented groups in general, as being in need of 'fixing' (Baker et al. 2004). Indeed, participant narratives displayed a strong sense of cultural pride and an emerging self-efficacy in their capacity to not only become teachers, but also to become teachers who seek to challenge structural and institutional discourses of deficit.

This developing political and social criticality, for participants and the programmes alike, sheds more light on both the structural and socio-cultural promoters and inhibiters of teaching aspirations amongst Travellers. Prior to participants' engagement with the programmes, the stringency of minimum academic requirements for entry to primary ITE made primary teaching unattainable for the Traveller participants. The length of the consecutive postgraduate route to teaching was also identified by participants as a significant barrier. While it should be noted that Travellers were largely absent from the 18-month postgraduate courses that operated prior to 2013, the significant decrease in participation rates of entrants from lower socio-economic groups in 2014, the first year of the 2-year programme, highlights the negative impact the move to longer programmes will continue to have on the Travellers with aspirations to teach (Keane and Heinz 2015). For many Travellers, a postgraduate route into teaching is often the only option due to the persistent presence of structural and cultural barriers to the profession at undergraduate level. Compared to undergraduate students, the lower levels of financial support available to Irish postgraduate students compounds this barrier even further. The findings of this study speak cogently to the need to ensure that the persistent financial barriers that prevent more Travellers accessing teaching are addressed and do not get obscured in the prevailing (but necessary) discourse around issues of cultural recognition.

Echoing findings from recent research into the experiences of Irish student teachers from lower socio-economic groups (Keane et al. 2018), the propensity of career guidance at school level to coach many students from under-represented groups *out* of teaching and "towards more 'realistic' options" (p. 90) was evident in some participants' experiences of post-primary education. Such experiences were particularly problematic, given their reliance on school-based guidance, as their families and wider social networks had little or no experience or knowledge of HE (Finnegan et al. 2019). In contrast, participants' narratives also speak to the critical role played by guidance in FE and the named programmes in reorienting their

occupational biographies towards teaching as an achievable career option. There is an emerging awareness in research (Finnegan et al. 2019; O'Neill and Burns 2021) and policy development (SOLAS 2020) of the importance of longitudinal guidance for students from under-represented groups that crosses institutional spaces and, ideally, follows them on often non-linear educational and occupational journeys.

In conclusion, there was a strong sense across the participants' narratives of a commitment to the pursuit of a teaching career as a way of making a difference in their own lives and the lives of others. Their engagement with the critically reflexive spaces of the two widening participation programmes in this study repositions their stories of becoming (student) teachers, not as narratives of deficit but towards narratives of diversity and inclusion that have the capacity to disrupt and enhance teacher education and the teaching profession.

Notes

1 Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH): Strand 1 (Equity of Access to Initial Teacher Education).
2 At the time of interview, Annie was studying on an undergraduate degree programme. Following completion, she was accepted onto the Professional Master of Education (Primary) programme.

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