

Living in the Shelter, Not the Shadows, of Each Other

It's time to celebrate Traveller culture and customs in our schools



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This article outlines the richness of Traveller culture and why it should be part of the Irish primary school curriculum. It is time to show children that, along with the new and exciting cultures they experience through their new friends from international backgrounds, there is a rich and valuable backstory to a national ethnic group whose story has too long been misunderstood. Doing so will help prevent mistakes from being repeated and will enable tolerance and appreciation to prevail.

In *The Master*, his seminal autobiography on his career as a teacher and school principal, the late and much-celebrated Listowel writer Bryan MacMahon fondly recounts his dealings with the Travelling community, their stories, their lore, their unique Shelta dialect, and their capacity as an ethnic group to survive great hardships with steely resilience and self-reliance.

Travellers' capacity to overcome great odds, and the genteel Kerry schoolmaster's scholarly understanding of their customs and ways, led to his invitation at the height of the Cold War to address an academic transatlantic gathering on what they could teach the world about survival after a nuclear attack. Irish Travellers were one of two ethnic groups identified by psychoanalysts of the time as having the innate natural toolkit to survive the unimaginable hardships of a post-apocalyptic reality.

In the 1930s, another noted primary teacher, Patrick Greene – fondly recalled in his native Longford as 'Master Greene' – combined his love of storytelling and folklore and the friendship and trust he developed with the many Travellers who seasonally camped on the roadsides in the Granard area, to mine a rich seam of priceless oral history for the Folklore Commission. At the time of his death in 2007, Master Greene was 107 and Ireland's oldest man. But he had continued to support Traveller children's education well past his 100th birthday, teaching them Shelta, widely known as the Cant and known to its native speakers in Ireland as De Gammon. His writings for the folklore periodical *Béaloides* in the 1930s, and his lexicon of Cant words, are among the most significant sources of information on Irish Traveller life.

Bryan MacMahon's most celebrated play, *The Honey Spike*, allows us to travel with a young pregnant woman and her husband from the travelling community in County Antrim, where she lives, to her favoured 'Spike' or birthing hospital

in Kerry, where she herself was born. Through the play we experience the richness of Irish Traveller culture and the highs and lows of life for those born into that nomadic tradition.

Bryan MacMahon and Patrick Greene, through their work as primary teachers and through their natural curiosity and empathy, gave us in their writings a window into the world of travelling people laced with a genuine respect and admiration for a way of life alien to our more formulated mores in the 'settled' community.

Over the past 25 years or so, the demographic in Irish primary schools has changed dramatically. When I became a school principal in 1994, a principal filling the school register rarely had to look beyond *An Sloinnteoir Gaeilge agus an tAimneoir* (a book of first names and surnames in Irish by Muiris Ó Droighneáin) to log the enrolment of new students under their 'Irish' moniker. Since that time, our schools and communities have been enriched with the arrival of people from all corners of the globe, bringing with them and sharing with us their rich and varied cultures.

Schools have played a huge part in easing the transition of people from other cultures to Irish life, while acknowledging their unique backgrounds and customs. International Day in many schools, particularly those with a wide variety of nationalities among their parent body, allows children to celebrate the uniqueness of their own cultures, traditions, and languages, and to proudly share with their peers details and samples of their foods, clothing, music, and customs. Sadly, such events do not eliminate racism and race-related incidents, but they do help enormously in bringing most people to a greater understanding and appreciation of the lives and lifestyles of their new neighbours.

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On 1 March 2017, then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny took the historic step of recognising Traveller ethnicity in Dáil Éireann. In doing so, he acknowledged the role of a 17-year-old named Robbie, who he said had deeply moved him during a representation made to him some weeks previously:

The representatives spoke passionately about how this strong message from the State would be a very important symbolic and positive step in acknowledging the uniqueness of Traveller identity. They felt it would resonate strongly among the community and help counter the stigma and shame felt by many, particularly young people, and increase feelings of respect, self-esteem, and inclusion.

At the time of writing, we are approaching five years since that significant day for the Irish Traveller community. It brought to fruition the tireless and often unheralded work of groups such as Pavee Point, the Irish Traveller Movement, the National Traveller Women's Forum, and Mincéirs Whiden, who have campaigned strongly on behalf of Travellers for decades. They have worked hard with the community to improve living conditions and to promote health and education and access to services. They have sought to empower Travellers and have not been afraid to help them address some of their own internal challenges.

In his speech, the Taoiseach announced the establishment of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS), whose meetings I've had the privilege of attending for a number of years on behalf of the Irish Primary Principals' Network. Reports on the good work being carried out with children, young adults, and parents in the Traveller community in the various areas where they live in significant numbers are indicative of a real interest in improving the lives of people on many fronts.

It is time now to include lessons on Traveller history and customs in our curriculum. It is time to show children today that, along with the new and exciting cultures they experience through their new friends from international backgrounds, there is a rich and valuable backstory to a national ethnic group whose story has too long been misunderstood, misinterpreted, and parodied. It is time to celebrate customs and a language that have existed in our midst but out of our eyeline for generations. Doing so will help prevent mistakes from being repeated and will enable tolerance and appreciation to prevail.

Leaving the last word to the Taoiseach: 'May all the people of our nation live in the shelter and never in the shadow of each other.'



On 1 March 2017, the then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny took the historic step of recognising Traveller ethnicity in Dáil Éireann.

This followed a representation by Travellers which had deeply moved the then-Taoiseach, at which they spoke passionately about how this strong message from the State would be a very important symbolic and positive step in acknowledging the uniqueness of Traveller identity.

Readings from The Universal Declaration of Human Rights by members of the Traveller Community, Mayo

VIDEO created by Breda Mayock for Mayo Traveller Support Group, for Culture Night 2021.

Coordinator: Louise Ward

Music: Breda Mayock

Speakers: Jessica McDonagh, Amy McDonagh, Bethany Ward, Andrea Ward, Joshua Maughan, Connor Allen & Eddie Allen

Watch the Video at

<https://youtu.be/Rq1H7GltSpk>



Breda Mayock - Artist and Musician

A PERSON



Eddie Allen

Jessica McDonagh

Amy McDonagh

Andrea Ward



Joshua Maughan

Bethany Ward

Connor Allen

Culture Night in Castlebar

by Breda Mayock

The theme of Castlebar Culture Night 2021 was **Inclusion, Diversity and Human Rights**. So, we thought that hearing The Declaration of Human Rights from the mouths of young people from the Traveller Community would be a simple but powerful message.

Louise Ward, director of Mayo Traveller Support Group, brought together a number of youths from Ballyhaunis and we filmed *A Person Just Like You*.

When I met with Louise, one of the first conversations we had focused on the future for the Traveller Community.

Louise was convinced that “the young people are our hope”.

“I feel that to encourage the younger generation and to move forward, especially with education, to have the courage to step out of comfort zones and to put fear of being judged or failing aside, is key. For our younger generation to have pride in their background, who they are and where they come from, is so very important”

In preparing for Culture Night 2021, I collaborated with Louise on ideas for a video with young people. As we were working, Andrea, one of the young girls, said that she had heard my song ‘If Your Heart’ and liked it. This inspired me to record a new version of the melody for the video.

The rights quoted by the young people included

- the right to work,
- the right to education,
- the right to travel,
- the right to be part of the government of our country.

The Traveller Community has been denied so many of these rights for such a long time. We in the settled community must fully and urgently realise that the way we treat the people of this valuable and unique Irish ethnic culture must change.

It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences - Audre Lorde