Submission to the Draft Plan on improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools.

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The educational status of Travellers, to include literacy and numeracy levels is considerably lower than that of their settled peers as revealed by the Census of population 2002 and 2006.

Fourteen years old, learning the alphabet
He finds letters harder to catch than hares
Without a greyhound. Can’t I give him a dog
To track them down, or put them in a cage
He’s caught in a trap, until I let him go
Pinioned by ”Don’t you want to learn to read?”
“I’ll be the same man whatever I do”

The Reading Lesson by Richard Murphy.

The reasons why Travellers have fared badly in education are many and complex with external and internal factors at play. Common themes to the research in the area of Travellers and educational disadvantage emphasise that there have been, and still are serious obstacles to securing for Travellers ready access, regular attendance, continuity of educational experience and satisfactory levels of achievement. (Kelleghan, 1995, Kenny, 1997, Collins 2001, Crowley, 2004). While the factors responsible for hindered access and poor or irregular attendance have been well documented (Kenny 1997, Lodge and Lynch 2004) relatively little work has been done in investigating the range of reasons for the seeming persistence of underachievement, despite a measured increase in school attendance. Current outcomes for Travellers must be examined in the light of low attendance levels for some pupils, early drop out for others and low levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy by many children.

If books resembled roads, he’d quickly read
But they’re small farms to him, fenced by the page
Ploughed into lines, with letters drilled like oats
A field of tasks he’ll always be outside

The Reading Lesson by Richard Murphy

For Travellers who have crossed the threshold of the school, Drudy and Lynch (1993) note that among the real barriers the children meet are the cultural mismatches – the language and mores of school most nearly match those of middle class aspiring homes. Many Traveller children come into the school system without this language, without the manual dexterity to hold a pencil for writing, and without the level of self control which allows easy sharing of a teacher’s time and other resources in large classes. These children are designated as weak or of low ability, but it is not that they are deficient in these areas in a generic sense, but rather that they possess abilities and intelligences which are not recognized in a formal or systematic way in education. Drudy and Lynch (1993, p.154) argue that many such children have verbal skills well in excess of their performance levels in school and on standardized tests and that “the schools themselves are the inhibiting forces”. They believe that the way forward maybe to develop the
pedagogical expertise needed to develop the language skills of children from culturally diverse backgrounds. In addition, Lynch (1999, p.107) notes that a negative evaluation of a group’s culture is a major contributing factor “in lowering people’s aspirations and expectations”.

**Lack of readiness to learn**

Igoa (1995, p.106) refers to the notion of Cultural Split occurring when children are under pressure to assimilate. Cultural Split begins when the child has to behave one way at home and another way at school. Children struggle with cultural shock and retreat within themselves, they may become defensive, angry, helpless, and unable to learn. Igoa (1995) advises that a Cultural, Academic and Psychological (CAP) approach is necessary in order to promote the successful inclusion and raise the attainment of children from minority ethnic groups. She argues that while instructional methodologies are important, the real key to success is to help each child deal with his or her inner world, and with the fears and anxieties that block learning. The CAP approach for an inclusive school acknowledges that children are in transition and that parents must be included in the education and acculturation process. It is necessary for teachers to show children how to participate in society without losing important cultural values of their own. Igoa (1995, p.146) notes that if the child can overcome the emotional hurdle of accepting the new culture without rejecting her native culture, and is able to “free herself from the emotional burdens of isolation, fear of ridicule, helplessness and anxiety, it then becomes easy to teach the child”. Igoa (1995) advises that these emotional burdens can be somewhat controlled by the three fold CAP intervention. However, Igoa (1996) warns that it is not easy to find a balance between the three aspects of CAP intervention, viewing the cultural and psychological aspects as the foundation, in clearing the way for academic intervention and attainment. It is important for children to feel that not only are they in an academically challenging classroom, but that they can all achieve in a classroom that is psychologically safe for learning.

**An Intercultural Curriculum for all pupils**

“Today we are going to study a poem about Travellers, would someone like to read”. Thus began the introduction to a lesson in Leaving Certificate Honours English class 2006. Everyone looked at Biddy, the only Traveller in the class and smiled benignly as she herself noted. The poem deals with the difficulties faced by young Travellers in the Irish education system and all was well until verse three.

“*I’ll not read anymore*, should I give up
His hands long fingered as a Celtic scribe’s
Will grow callous, gathering sticks or scrap
Exploring pockets of the horny drunk
Loiterers at the fair giving them lice
A neighbour chuckles “you can never tame
The wild duck, when his wings grow, he will fly off”.

The Reading Lesson by Richard Murphy.
Biddy could not believe that her English teacher had chosen this poem as being representative of literature written about or by “my people”, members of the Traveller Community. She felt embarrassed as did her classmates on her behalf. The teacher was apologetic, this poem received very little analysis in class for which everyone was grateful. As an attempt at Intercultural education, it was not successful, bringing the Christopher Columbus Principle to mind – “Columbus did not know where he was going, when he got there he did not know where he was, and when he got back home, he did not know where he had been”.

Apart from the importance of learning materials having relevance to pupil’s real life experiences, and their understanding of the world in which they live, it is also fundamentally important that such materials are sensitively introduced, in the context of affirmation of self and group identity. Carefully chosen materials can be used to show that Traveller culture, history and language are legitimate, relevant and worthy of celebration. Such practice would seem to be vital for many Travellers who may feel a lack of being valued in school settings, given the commonly perceived and negative public stereotypes of the Traveller Community in general.

Bruner (1996, p.98) argues that “school presents so alien and so remote a vision of the world that many learners can find no place in it for them or their friends”. Bruner advises that learning is best when it is “participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them”. The hidden curriculum in schools gives Travellers a negative image of themselves, and because this discrimination is subtle, it is difficult to deal with. Travellers are not named, diversity not celebrated, their culture is denied. The issue of celebrating difference and tackling the hidden curriculum is an issue for the whole school. The structure and value system of school is geared to settled children, there is an issue involved in getting Traveller children to see the relevance of education to life and work in general.

**Teacher Expectation**

Kenny (1997) found that Traveller pupils managed to resist teacher’s agendas by presenting themselves as victims, pleading inability to tackle tasks that they were subsequently found to be well able to complete. Kenny notes that a clear divergence between ability and attainment indicates that many so called learning difficulties are structurally produced products of oppression, and that teachers need to look anew at the children’s performance, as presently, “many cling to a glass ceiling that is very near the floor”. Confidence is fostered by success but teachers need to be aware of the compassion trap. Kenny (1995,p.12) warns that “where fear of success is deep, compassion can inhibit rather than encourage achievement”.
References


