



LIMERICK  
TRAVELLER  
NETWORK

"Giving Travellers A  
Voice"

EXCHANGE HOUSE IRELAND  
National Traveller Service

# Traveller Education Change Project Report

## Executive Summary



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TRAVELLER EDUCATION CHANGE PROJECT is a Participatory Action Research project of the Limerick Traveller Network developed and implemented with the support of Exchange House Ireland National Travellers Service. The project was guided and approved by Maynooth University.



- **Traveller Education Change Project:** VIDEO available at <https://youtu.be/7UQM8SW6TS8>
- **This report is available at:** <https://www.exchangehouse.ie/publications.php>.
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# Executive Summary

Irish Travellers, an indigenous ethnic minority, continue to face entrenched challenges in accessing and thriving in the Irish education system. These issues, rooted in historical discrimination and systemic neglect, result in significantly lower retention and attainment rates when compared with their settled peers. While some improvements have been made, stark inequalities remain. For example, 40.4% of Travellers leave formal education by the age of 16, compared to just 11.2% of the general population. At the other end of the spectrum, only 4.7% of Travellers hold a third-level qualification, in stark contrast to 47.7% of the wider population.

## Traveller Education Change Project

### *Limerick Traveller Network*

Limerick Traveller Network (LTN) is a Traveller led initiative set up to give a voice to the Traveller community in Limerick city. It is based on a Network of most of Limerick city's Traveller specific sites and housing areas of residency. LTN is represented by 14 Traveller women. Of the roughly 150 Traveller families living in Limerick, 130 have consented to representation in the Limerick Traveller Network.

LTN is funded by the Department of Community and Rural Development under the governance of Exchange House Ireland National Travellers Service (EHINTS). It currently employs a support team of 1 co-ordinator and 2 Network leadership workers. LTN is seeking to become an independent organisation in the coming years.

### *Exchange House Ireland National Travellers Service*

Exchange House Ireland National Travellers Service (EHINTS) is a national Traveller organisation set up in 1980. It provides multi-disciplinary frontline service provider offering Education and Training Services, Children and Young People Services, Family Support and Crisis Intervention Services, Addiction Services and the National Traveller Mental Health Service. It also works in partnership with other organisations, locally, regionally and nationally. In Limerick, it has supported the development of Limerick Traveller Network and the Traveller Education Change Project.

## Project Development

In its formation, the Limerick Traveller Network (LTN) identified Education, Accommodation, Discrimination, and Mental Health as key priority areas. The Traveller Education Change Project specifically addresses concerns regarding the poor educational outcomes for Traveller children in Limerick city, as raised by LTN. To develop targeted action programmes, the project sought to identify the factors contributing to these poor outcomes and build Traveller expertise to drive change. This led to the creation of a Participatory Action Research proposal, which secured funding from the RTÉ Toy Show Appeal, managed by the Community Foundation Ireland.

## Project Aims

**The core objectives of this research are twofold:**

- **To create expertise within the Traveller community**, equipping members with the knowledge and tools to address their own challenges.
- **To develop projects and pilot initiatives** in direct collaboration with key stakeholders, ensuring the insights generated from this research translate into concrete actions.

## Project Implementation

Exchange House Ireland National Travellers Service, the governance body for LTN, employed 12 Traveller Peer Researchers (working 8 hours weekly) from March 2023 to October 2024, as well as a part-time project coordinator. Exchange House Ireland National Travellers Service also partnered with Maynooth University, which provided monthly project supervision and approval for the research.

The project was centred in Limerick city. Data was collected for a total of 164 Traveller children living in all areas represented by Limerick Traveller Network: Castletroy, Groovy, Childers Road, Rebogue, Ballysimon, Carew Park, Toppings Field, Ballynacurra-Weston, Southill, Clonlong, Ennis Road, Caherdavin, Thomond, and Long Pavement. The project included a training phase as well as field visits and meetings with education stakeholders to further learn about existing supports and projects working with Traveller education.

## The Importance of Traveller Inclusion: Participatory-Action Research

This report is underpinned by a participatory action research methodology, which places Traveller voices at the centre of the research process. This project empowered Traveller peer researchers to actively shape the research, ensuring it reflected their community's lived experiences.

Traveller peer researchers contributed to every stage, including:

- **Questionnaire Design:** Shaping questions that resonated with community priorities, such as school support systems, parental involvement, and cultural representation.
- **Data Collection:** Achieving a high response rate of 62% through community-led engagement, surpassing typical participation levels in traditional research.
- **Focus Groups:** Facilitating discussions with Traveller children to uncover insights into their school experiences, confidence in learning, and future aspirations.

This inclusive methodology not only produced more insightful and culturally relevant findings but also built trust within the community, fostering ownership of both the research and its outcomes. By equipping Traveller researchers with skills in data collection and analysis, this approach also built capacity for future advocacy and self-representation, and contributes to Traveller's preparation towards achieving inclusion of Travellers as partners and workforce in the education sector.

## Key Findings

The study highlights systemic structural and cultural barriers Traveller children encounter throughout their educational journey:

1. **Retention and Attainment:** Research consistently finds that Traveller students leave formal education at far higher rates than their peers and struggle to match their educational outcomes. The gap between Traveller children and their peers grows throughout their educational journey: while over 50% of parents of younger children reported that their child was on par with peers, this drops to 44% by ages 8-10 and 35% by ages 11-12. At the end of Primary education a large number of Traveller pupils are not sufficiently prepared to transition to Secondary education. Student happiness also declines as they progress through their education.
2. **Ineffective Support Systems:** Parents reported that 67% of their children in Primary Education, and 75.9% in Secondary were receiving Special education supports, mostly through Especial Education Support groups outside main class. Data collected from parents showed that 12% of children had their education needs assessed by an agency (HSE-NEPS). The higher number of assessed children is in the age group 13-15.

Only 30.9% of parents feel that current special education supports meet their children's needs. Current support systems do not translate into educational attainment.

These educational gaps contribute to decreased engagement and a stronger likelihood of leaving school. Poor educational outcomes impact negatively on Traveller children limiting their personal development and well-being, and hindering their life prospects.

3. **Communication and Parental Engagement:** Traveller parents are committed to supporting their children's educational success, but communication challenges limit engagement. 70% of Traveller parents struggle to consistently understand school communications while none of the respondents were members of school boards or parents' associations.
4. **Cultural Absence:** Traveller culture is deeply important to parents. Most parents identified a need for a better understanding of Traveller culture as part of Irish culture, and said that its inclusion in school was needed for the improvement of Traveller education outcomes. 47% of Traveller families surveyed said that Traveller culture was not present in their school. 41% felt that schools were inclusive of Traveller culture and 12% were not sure. Discrimination in schools as reported by parents is higher in secondary school (56%) compared to Primary (30%) and Pre-school (16%).

## Recommendations: Building on the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES)

This report's findings align closely with the priorities outlined in the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) 2024–2030, which aims to address the systemic barriers faced by Traveller students through four strategic pillars:

1. **Participation and Experience:** Ensuring Traveller students feel included and valued at all levels of the education system.
2. **Access and Outcomes:** Promoting equity of access to education, improving retention, and ensuring positive educational outcomes.
3. **Partnership:** Encouraging collaboration across departments, agencies, and Traveller communities to implement the strategy.
4. **Delivering Change:** Monitoring progress, ensuring accountability, and adapting policies as necessary.

TRES recognises the need for holistic, culturally responsive interventions and advocates for greater Traveller involvement in education. However, this report argues that additional actions are required to ensure meaningful implementation, including:

- Developing **local, Traveller-led strategic education plans** tailored to specific community needs.
- Expanding **community-based early education programmes** that incorporate Traveller culture and values.
- Enhancing **support systems** by employing more Traveller educators and ensuring special education placements are purposeful and goal-oriented.
- Providing **anti-racism and intercultural competence training** for teachers and school staff to combat bias and discrimination.

## Recommendations

To tackle these systemic inequities, the report calls for bold, culturally responsive reforms:

- **Early Interventions:** Expand access to culturally inclusive pre-schools, ensure timely developmental assessments, and employ Traveller educators to reflect the community's identity.
- **Reimagining Support Systems:** Comprehensive review of support and assessment systems. Ensure that current supports are targeted, time-bound interventions co-designed with Traveller families to close educational gaps and integrate students into mainstream classes.
- **Inclusive Curricula:** Embed Traveller history and culture into the national curriculum, ensuring it is recognised as part of Ireland's heritage.
- **Communication and Traveller Empowerment:** Improve communication systems by developing training programmes that equip Travellers to effectively collaborate with educators, make informed decisions and be part of their children schools. Implement a programme to support Traveller employment in schools and after-schools, working in a variety of roles to improve Traveller education and communication and parental engagement.
- **Combating Bias:** Provide training for teachers to address implicit and explicit bias, fostering equitable treatment of Traveller students.
- **Pathways to Further Education:** Establish clear progression routes for Traveller students, including vocational training, apprenticeships, and third-level opportunities, developing tailored local programmes co-created with Young Travellers and that meet Travellers interests, cultural values and current circumstances.
- **Universal Traveller support in schools and after-schools:** Ensure that all Traveller children have access to education supports (even if not living in a DEIS designated area) and that they have the option of availing of Afterschool programmes that are developed with and employ Travellers, and support Traveller children personal and educational development and Traveller identity.
- **Further develop and expand current models of good practice.**

## A Transformative Approach

By placing Traveller voices at the heart of this project, this report demonstrates the transformative potential of participatory action research. Traveller-led methodologies not only generate richer, more insightful findings but also build trust and empower communities to drive their own change.

Implementing these recommendations, alongside the robust framework of TRES, will require commitment and collaboration across all levels of the education system. However, by addressing these barriers, Ireland has an opportunity to create an equitable educational environment where Traveller children can thrive and realise their full potential.



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