

Minutes of the 2nd meeting of the Advisory Committee on Traveller and Roma Education

Monday the 26th of November 2013, 10.00 – 1.00 am

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre

Attendance: Aodhán O' Ríordáin TD (Member of the Select Sub Committee on Education and Skills) , Jean Rafter (NEWB), Martin Collins (Co-Director, Pavee Point), Kathleen McDonnell (Traveller Community Worker) and Johnny Mc Donagh (Traveller Community Worker), Gabi Muntenau (Roma Community Worker) Paul Downes (Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patricks College), Mairin Kenny (Independent Academic), Deirbhile Nic Craith (Irish National Teachers Organisation)

Apologies: Mary Corrigan (Barnardos, TESO project), Ronnie Fay (Co –Director Pavee Point)

Items for discussion:

- Introductions
- Discussion of the Successful Education Experiences
- What experiences have relevance in the Irish context and should be included in the National Viability Strategy
- How experiences can be disseminated through the group
- Continuation of the committee past the culmination of the Rom Up project

Discussion of the Successful Educational Experiences

There was widespread interest in the actions within the report. One of the issues that was remarked on by members of the group was the significant policy context that existed in other European countries which was almost completely lacking in an Irish context. This was considered to be particularly the case in a number of the examples from Spain where there seemed to have been a number of attempts to introduce education policies to effectively integrate Roma children into to the education system and ensure better educational outcomes.

In contrast, there have been no policies introduced to address the issue of Roma in the education system in Ireland. It was felt that there were a number of reasons behind this. The relatively small Roma population in the country means that successive governments have essentially been able to ignore the issue.

Comparably there are a higher number of policies which address Travellers in education, but as was noted in the group, the two populations are considered very separate in Ireland despite the fact that they are grouped together at a European level.

There were concerns that introducing successful educational actions would prove particularly difficult in this context as they could not be embedded in any wider structure.

The fact that many Roma in Ireland do not qualify for Habitual Residence Condition - a social welfare restriction which determines access to social payments was viewed as the biggest barrier for Roma families in accessing education.

Roma children's poor attendance rates were considered to be often as a result of families being forced to move from place to place due to poor living conditions. This makes it difficult for educational practitioners to keep track of children's whereabouts and educational records.

The main challenge identified was a complete lack of framework from which to work towards Roma inclusion in the education system. As a result, educational practitioners and other stakeholders are working in a vacuum without proper supports and strategies from which to approach the work of Roma inclusion.

It was felt that although many of the 'Successful Educational Experiences' were essentially 'cost neutral', teachers and schools needed to feel supported by the Department of Education when it came to implementing these projects.

Experiences to include in the National Viability Strategy

1. Bulgarian project which focused on 'Decreasing the Drop-out Rate' was considered particularly relevant to the Irish context as it acknowledged that social activities alone are not a sufficient solution to Roma inclusion in education. Early school leaving is a significant problem among the Roma and Traveller population in Ireland. This has been exacerbated by the recession and was identified as an area that needed immediate attention
2. The 'Family and Community Education' - project has shown how education and training among family and community members help to transfer positive attitude to learning among children. Engaging Traveller and Roma parents has proven difficult in an Irish context as there is often an understandable mistrust of civil servants.
3. The Decisive Family/Community Participation model in Spain was selected given its success in reducing school attendance and completion rates and improving student achievement. This was viewed as a possible way to address school attendance issues as the Traveller and Roma population have low or sporadic attendance rates.

4. The 'Socio-Medical Centres for Roma' - project in Greece was identified as an excellent example of what organisations working with Roma should be striving for particularly given its focus on empowering women as agents of change.

Dissemination of experiences

Decreasing the Drop-out Rate (Bulgaria) was chosen for wider distribution to teachers at both primary and post primary level through the national teachers unions (INTO and ASTI) and the National Education Welfare Board

Decisive Family/Community Participation (Spain) was selected for dissemination by the committee through their networks and among education practitioners.

Socio-Medical Centres for Roma (Greece) given the length and depth of this action it was felt that this project should be selected for distribution to Department of Education personnel and other statutory agencies.

Continuation of the Committee

Given the short timeline of the Rom Up project and the significant challenges in this area in Ireland, all members agreed to continue on the Advisory Committee past the lifetime of the Rom UP! project and to meet four times a year with a wider remit.