

# LEARNING FROM LIFE - EXCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM. THREE QUESTIONS TO ANNE BURKE

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*Since 2017, the Irish government has formally recognised the Traveller community as a distinct ethnic group (Pavee Point, 2017). In Ireland's latest census from 2022, the number of Travellers was counted as 32,949, meaning that Irish Travellers make up less than 1% of the population (Central Statistics Office, 2023).*

*However, Travellers remain one of the most marginalised groups in Irish society. According to Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin (2018), Irish Travellers have historically experienced disadvantage in relation to education, health, housing and employment. As a result, Travellers face higher rates of mortality, disability, and morbidity than the general population. Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin (2018) concluded that "a process of cumulative disadvantage operates over time, whereby a lifetime of more challenging experiences combines to produce poorer outcomes."*

*Within the education sector, progression for Travellers remains poorer than the rest of the population. While the vast majority of Traveller children attend primary school, retention rates in post-primary education are considerably lower for Travellers. The latest data published by Ireland's Department of Education reflects the cohort who entered post-primary in 2016. Of that cohort, 72.2% of Travellers completed the Junior Certificate<sup>1</sup> compared to 97.6% of the entire school enrolments for the 2016 cohort, while only 32.4% completed the Leaving Certificate<sup>2</sup> compared to 91.7% for the full cohort (Department of Education, 2023).*

*Within higher education, Travellers are almost invisible (Brennan, Cummins, Ó Súilleabhán, McGovern, & Quilligan, 2024). Only approximately 1% of Travellers hold a higher education qualification compared to over 40% of the total population (Higher Education Authority & Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022).*

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<sup>1</sup> The Junior Certificate is a state exam completed at the end of the junior cycle in secondary cycle (i.e., at the end of third year).

<sup>2</sup> The Leaving Certificate is the final state exam of the Irish secondary school system and the higher education matriculation exam.

*In 2018, the Southern Traveller Health Network (STHN) took the initiative to attempt to address some of this disadvantage by reaching out to Adult Continuing Education (ACE) at University College Cork (UCC) to explore the co-creation of a leadership development programme for a group of Traveller women. Following the development of a true partnership approach, a part-time Diploma in Leadership in the Community (EQF level 5, 60 ECTS) was launched in the academic year 2019/2020 (Cummins, Leane, McGovern, Byrne, & STHN, 2022). Twenty-one women ultimately completed the course, and their graduation made headline news throughout Ireland (University College Cork, 2022).*

*Anne Burke, who works with the Southern Traveller Health Network in Ireland, was instrumental in the development, delivery, and ultimate success of the course. Anne is an Irish Traveller and works tirelessly to advocate for the travelling community, particularly to increase participation in education initiatives and achieve equality of education for Travellers.*

**Lyndsey El Amoud:** What would you identify as the key barriers to higher education for marginalised groups such as Irish Travellers?

**Anne Burke:** The key barrier is getting through second level and that is where the big issue is for us. Traveller children are coming from a primary system where they do not have good literacy and numeracy. When they go into secondary schools, what we are finding is that they are no sooner in the door than there is almost a mission on to get them back out: to expel them or to put them on a reduced timetable, to do anything with them but actually try to grapple with the core issue of identity. There is no sense of belonging with the Traveller children in school; everything around them is about white Irish settled people. There is no representation there: there are no teachers there that are Travellers or that even have cultural competency. As Travellers, we almost live in a bubble. We live on the margins, excluded from society but we have to interact in school. We have traveller children going in at the age of four and quickly by the time they are six or seven, they are thinking “*there’s something different here, there’s something wrong here. This isn’t for me - I don’t belong here.*” It is not a healthy learning environment for them.

We are also struggling with the parents and trying to develop a sense of expectation as well because they have come through a system that they have been traumatised through. And then with the mental health crisis, parents are scared now. They are saying “*I send them into school, for what? They are getting nothing out of it, and they will probably end up being traumatised like I am.*”

I fought to desegregate the system for travellers. I fought hard for that. But after fighting for it, I am wondering to myself, would our children not be better off where they feel safe, where they feel understood, where they feel heard? Would they not be better off in a space like that besides being lost in those systems that do not care about them and all they want to do is get them out?

I know we are talking about higher education here, but really and truly, apart from the odd mature student we get to go back or the ones that are hiding their identity, there are so few Travellers going to third level. For the ones that are hiding their identity,

then I'm sure finance has become a barrier because they are afraid to access Traveller supports because that will out them and some of them feel guilty because they say *"well I hid my identity and I do not have the right to go and get help because I hid it all my life."* That then becomes another trauma and another burden.

All that internalised oppression, that's a huge barrier. All the spaces that you go back into, even going to school to help your child, it is triggering. You are brought back to that time when you were treated so badly, and you did not know any better. It is bad enough to be treated badly when you understand what is going on. But when you do not understand what is going on, you do not know what you have done wrong. You think *"well there must be something wrong with me."* I thought that when I first started going to school. I really believed that there was a problem with me. As you get older, then you start looking at other Travellers and you think *"well, maybe if they did not do that or maybe if they did not do this."* I believed if I was more like a settled person, I would be more accepted.

It is a societal problem, but it is forced on us to create the awareness around it, to do something about it. Racism is the big barrier. It is everywhere. Life is hard enough; it is hard for everyone. But that extra thing, no matter what you are going through, you have to have a thought in your head. Every settled space you go into, you have to have that thought in your head *"I have to be on my guard here. If I hear stuff, I have to know how I want to react to it."* You cannot live your life like that. That really impacts on your mental health.

**Lyndsey El Amoud:** Telling us a little about the programme, what do you think were the key conditions for the success of the Irish Traveller women leadership programme in UCC?

**Anne Burke:** The support, the understanding, the empathy, the wrap around supports, almost pre-empting what is going to go wrong here and getting in there beforehand and trying to troubleshoot and make sure that it was as good an experience as it could possibly be. Even to be hit with COVID and having to adapt to all that, I think if there was ever a testament to people's will once, they decide to do something, it was this course. In other circumstances it would not have happened like that. If we as a Traveller organisation could not have done that pre-development work with them, if we had not created that safe space for them where they felt secure, and if we had not come across yourselves who were also of the mind and fully understanding of what these women, the sacrifices they were making, and how difficult the challenge it was going to be for them. We had all of that, it was just like we had the magic recipe there and it worked so well. And we have built on that as well, so twenty women did not finish the course and then we said goodbye, we were there afterwards as well. So, we were there before and we were there afterwards, and we made sure that we were not just going to drop them after they did that, we were going to try and find pathways either for a future in education or a future in work and we still offer that support.

I think we are living in a world now where everything is quick and fast and get you in and get you out, and compassion and empathy are gone. Systems are now like a revolving door and that is the problem with the world today. I certainly think that

whether it be health or whether it be anything, the human side of things is gone, and you have to mind the human. There were a couple of women who wanted so desperately to get on that course and I thought “*they have no literacy, they are definitely not going to do this. No, we should not let them through.*” And then a part of me, a part of my heart said, “*who am I to deny somebody an opportunity if they really, really want to do this?*” In the end, they didn't drop out. They were the ones that worked harder.

**Lyndsey El Amoud:** What would your call to action be for universities across Europe when it comes to marginalised groups?

**Anne Burke:** Where I see things working well with Indigenous people is where you have community organisations linking with the colleges and the colleges linking with the organisations. Because you cannot walk out onto the street and say to an Indigenous person “*come on, you have to go to college here.*” You have to find them where they are at, wherever that is, you go and you find them. You cannot sit and wait for them, expecting them to come in. Reach out to NGOs. Send your students into the NGO. Develop networks with NGOs, strong, meaningful partnerships that are like what we did, strong partnerships, not tokenistic ones, not sending somebody a form to fill out asking “*are you interested in this?*” But actually, go out and sit with people, have a cup of tea with people, listen to the problems, listen to the issues, read up, understand, create an awareness. Reach out – they are never going to come to you. These people are already traumatised, they are not going to further traumatised themselves. Create pathways and create stepping stones. If we want a good, healthy, vibrant, thriving society, inclusion, inclusion, inclusion, everybody needs to be included!

**Lyndsey El Amoud:** Thank you very much.

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