



**Going for our dreams  
in a racist society:**

*Our stories of education  
as young Travellers*

Voices of Leaving Certificate  
Students who are members of the  
Traveller community

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Traveller  
Movement



## Contents

Preface.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Going for our dreams in a racist society: Our stories of education as young Travellers. Voices of Leaving Certificate students who are members of the Traveller community.....	4
Appendix: Letter to Students.....	12

## Preface

The following document, *Going for our dreams in a racist society*, tells stories by five Leaving Certificate students about their school experiences as members of the Traveller community. They join the thousands of other young people around the country in having dreams for their future, and in seeing their Leaving Certificate as a vital stepping stone towards those dreams. As Travellers, however, the authors of this document cannot take this educational road to their dreams for granted. According to the 2016 census just over 13 per cent of Traveller women and 10 per cent of Traveller men were educated to upper secondary or above<sup>1</sup>. This is shockingly below the corresponding figures for the general population of over 69 per cent and 70 per cent respectively. Without immediate change within the educational system, the consequences for the 15,332 young Travellers aged 0-19 living in Ireland are profoundly serious<sup>2</sup>. This figure equates to almost 50 percent of the overall Traveller population.

However, one of the core obstacles to constructively and respectfully engaging with this issue is a dominant narrative which blames Traveller students, their families, their community and their culture for the inequalities they face. This “cultural deficit lens” is encountered by students from other marginalised and minority groups too, both in Ireland and internationally<sup>3</sup>. Through this lens, teachers often hold low expectations for those students, perceive them as “weaker” students and as “undesirable” learners<sup>4</sup>. Galway Traveller Movement’s (GTM’s) own experiences concur with these findings<sup>5</sup>. Our experience is that the voices and perspectives of young Travellers are often not valued or heard.

GTM decided to take a narrative approach to documenting the experiences of Traveller students in secondary school. We were drawn to this approach because it recognises people as experts in their own experiences and also honours the rich diversity of their voices<sup>6</sup>. We invited Siobhán Madden on board as an experienced narrative practitioner. Recognising the limits of her knowledge as a settled person, Siobhán drew on the cultural expertise and analysis of the GTM Education Team led by Jane Ward.

Young Travellers from different areas of County Galway were invited to participate in a conversation about their experiences in school, their culture and about the things and people that were important to them.<sup>7</sup> All the contributors responded by identifying the racism they encountered in school as a central problem in their lives. They shared their knowledge about the workings of racism and its terrible effects. These effects included how racism violated precious dreams, and how it undermined cultural values and identities. The conversations also invited stories to help shine a light on skills, knowledge, values and purposes in life which often get hidden under the radar. We were curious about where these skills and knowledge came from, such as the contributions of family members.

The five young people who contributed to this document hope that their stories will help other Travellers in school, and teachers to have a better understanding of what it is like to be a Traveller student. They have also expanded on these hopes in their messages to other Travellers in school, to principals and to teachers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8itseah/>

<sup>2</sup> Census of Population 2022. F5064 Population usually resident and present in the State. Data for White Irish Traveller, Both sexes, 0-4 years (3,718), 5-9 years (4,176), 10-14 years 4,086, 15-19 years. 3,352. <https://data.cso.ie/#>

<sup>3</sup> Mc Ginley, H. and Keane, E. “The School for the Travellers and the Blacks”: Student and Teacher Perspectives on “Choosing” a Post-Primary School with a High Concentration of Disadvantage. *Education Sciences*, 2021, 11 (12), 777. Downloaded from [https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/12/777dc213044ac84.filesusr.com/ugd/5cfafe\\_0dc001ab34414419b855ebe82b7890f1.pdf](https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/12/777dc213044ac84.filesusr.com/ugd/5cfafe_0dc001ab34414419b855ebe82b7890f1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Mc Ginley, H. and Keane, E. (2021).

<sup>5</sup> See also Quinlan, M., *Out of the Shadows – Traveller and Roma Education: Voices from The Communities*, Dublin: Government of Ireland, 2021, available at <https://1d3ad8c0-4fe5-46e5-9b07>.

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Denborough, D., *Collective Narrative Practice: Responding to Individuals, Groups and Communities Who Have Experienced Trauma*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix, Letter to Students.

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## Acknowledgements

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Dr Siobhán Madden for co-researching and documenting the stories.

Jessica Reid for designing the document.

The five young people who contributed their stories, knowledge and expertise to support change for their community and the wider society.

Galway Traveller Movement, 2023.

# Going for our dreams in a racist society: Our stories of education as young Travellers

Voices of Leaving Certificate  
Students who are members  
of the Traveller community

## Introduction

We are five Leaving Cert students who are members of the Traveller community – four young men and one young woman. Every one of us is proud to be a Traveller.

We believe that all people should be able to be proud of their cultures and where they came from.

We believe in equality and respect for everyone no matter what culture, colour or religion you are.

We believe in going for your dreams.

This document tells our different stories in our different voices. It tells about our hopes and dreams, the unfairness of racism and discrimination we all face, and some of our knowledge and skills of life. It also tells our messages for teachers, principals and for other Traveller students.

## Our hopes and dreams

We all hope to get a job that we like and to make a living. It's easier to get a good job if you have your Leaving Cert. Some jobs require you to have your Leaving Cert.

*"I want to get a job because I want to be able to provide for a family in the future. There is no point being on the dole."*

*"I want to be independent and to have my own money. I don't want to depend on the dole."*

"I want to get a job because I want to be able to provide for a family in the future. There is no point being on the dole."

"I want to be independent and to have my own money. I don't want to depend on the dole."

"I want to get a job close to home. It might be doing power-washing and cutting grass. Or maybe work in a shop. I am doing my driving theory test and want to learn how to drive. I might go for a job as a driving instructor."

It's easier to get a good job if you have your Leaving Cert. Some jobs require you to have your Leaving Cert.

*"I want to get a job close to home. It might be doing power-washing and cutting grass. Or maybe working in a shop. I am doing my driving theory test and want to learn how to drive. I might go for a job as a driving instructor."*

*"Six months ago, I decided I wanted to study to become a dialysis nurse or doctor because my friend is on dialysis. I know how long the course is. I know how much I will earn. Even if I don't succeed in being a doctor or nurse, I will go to college. I always wanted to go to college. It was from watching movies and seeing other friends go. I think it will be good craic! It will also give me more experiences. College will help me to get a job that allows me to make more money because I want to travel. I would rather live my life experiencing other cultures than being stuck at home."*

*"I always said I will go for my dream job. I like doing hair. I like doing makeup so I'm sticking by that. From when I was younger, I was watching my sisters and my aunties all doing their makeup. So I kept watching them and eventually I know how to do makeup now."*

*"When I was younger, I always said to my family I was going to do my Leaving Cert. Look at me now. In a couple of months, I'll have my Leaving Cert. When I finish my Leaving Cert, I'm going to a course for hair and makeup. That is my dream and I am working hard to get it."*

## **The unfairness of racism and discrimination**

Most people in the settled community do not treat Travellers with respect.

You cannot walk anywhere without getting public discrimination.

You cannot even walk into a shop with confidence if you have money to buy stuff there. They usually follow you around.

You cannot go into a restaurant without anxiety about getting put out of the place. If you're going to book a hotel for a wedding, most hotels won't give you a booking if they know you're a Traveller. You have to put on a different voice over the phone.

*"When I was younger, I always said to my family I was going to do my Leaving Cert. Look at me now. In a couple of months, I'll have my Leaving Cert. When I finish my Leaving Cert, I'm going to a course for hair and makeup. That is my dream and I am working hard to get it."*

*"I had a teacher who said to me, 'All you will be any good for is getting the dole.'"*

A couple of us were out recently and were just walking on the street. We got stopped by the guards for no reason. Discrimination makes you feel not safe because you can't even call the guards if something happens.

Discrimination makes you angry.

All of us have experienced racism and discrimination in school that made it hard to be in school. These are some of the unfair things we have faced:

### **Low expectations from teachers**

We have found that a lot of teachers have low expectations of Travellers. Some teachers didn't even try to teach us.

*"I had a maths teacher who ignored me when I put up my hand to ask a question about a problem. My hand might be up for five minutes. If a buffer put their hand up, the teacher got to them right away. If I asked something without putting my hand up, the teacher would say, 'Put up your hand'. When I put up my hand, they still ignored me."*

*"Sometimes, when I asked the teacher a question, they made me sound like I should have known the answer even though we only started learning about it. When that happens, it makes you sound stupid."*

*"I had a teacher who said to me, 'All you will be any good for is getting the dole.' "*

### **Being bullied or taunted**

A lot of Traveller children get bullied because of who they are. If you are the only Traveller in a buffer school you get done.

*"When I was in primary school, members of the settled community would taunt me and provoke me to anger."*

### **Treated unfairly**

Travellers in school often get blamed in the wrong for doing things they didn't do.

If a country fellow gets into a fight with a Traveller, our experience is that the teachers usually side with the country fellow. Even if a teacher was looking at it and seen that the country fellow started it, they will still often take the side of the country person.

*"I have a friend who was suspended for two weeks for fighting with a settled boy. The settled boy was suspended for two days."*

### **Not understanding our culture and making assumptions**

A lot of settled teachers and students don't understand our culture, our beliefs, our religion. We also have different words which they don't understand. They might have ideas about Travellers, like that you get married at fifteen or sixteen. We find that a lot of people go painting us all with the one brush. All this makes a lot of Traveller girls and Traveller boys feel odd going to school.

*"Sometimes, when I asked the teacher a question, they made me sound like I should have known the answer even though we only started learning about it. When that happens, it makes you sound stupid."*

*"I have a friend who was suspended for two weeks for fighting with a settled boy. The settled boy was suspended for two days."*

*"Traveller boys still have more freedom than girls but that is changing. I came from a very strict family. But I was always the one that didn't listen. I had a dream of not settling down at a young age. There's a lot of Traveller women out there that has jobs got. There are a lot of Traveller women and girls that go for their dreams."*



*“Traveller boys still have more freedom than girls but that is changing. I came from a very strict family. But I was always the one that didn’t listen. I had a dream of not settling down at a young age. There’s a lot of Traveller women out there that has jobs got. There are a lot of Traveller women and girls that go for their dreams.”*

## Effects of racism and discrimination

These are some of the ways the unfairness of racism and discrimination affects us:

### Keeping your guard up

You learn to build up your guard over all the years because of the ways you get treated by settled people.

Keeping your guard up is the idea that you have to give it back to them to stop it. You learn that if you don’t keep your guard up, a lot of settled people think they can walk over you, that they can do and say whatever they want to you.

*“It feels like my guard was just always up. In school, if a teacher doesn’t show me respect, I don’t show them respect. If they have attitude with me, I’ll have attitude back with them.”*

*“I have been boxing since I was three or four years old. I don’t even like boxing. I do it so I’m able to defend myself.”*

### Anger

Discrimination makes you angry.

*“When I was in national school, if I felt I was being treated differently I would act out with violence. Once, I flipped the table over at a teacher but it missed. When I became violent in school, other children would taunt and provoke me more.”*

Sometimes, when you get angry, your culture gets the blame.

A teacher said to me, *“Maybe if your community was different maybe you wouldn’t be like this.”*

*“It feels like my guard was just always up. In school, if a teacher doesn’t show me respect, I don’t show them respect. If they have attitude with me, I’ll have attitude back with them.”*

*“I have been boxing since I was three or four years old. I don’t even like boxing. I do it so I’m able to defend myself.”*

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*A teacher said to me, “Maybe if your community was different maybe you wouldn’t be like this.”*

"I liked maths in primary school and I was good at it. I lost interest in maths in secondary because the teacher treated me differently. When the teacher kept ignoring me when I put up my hand to ask a question, I realised there was no point in putting up my hand. They were only going to make a fool of me."

"My mother was always there for me. When I was going through a hard time in primary school, she tried to help me out. She would listen to my side of the story. She would talk to me and this would calm me down."

### **Losing interest in a subject you liked**

When a teacher treats you differently to the settled students, it makes it awkward to learn.

*"I liked maths in primary school and I was good at it. I lost interest in maths in secondary because the teacher treated me differently. When the teacher kept ignoring me when I put up my hand to ask a question, I realised there was no point in putting up my hand. They were only going to make a fool of me."*

### **Leaving school early**

When we hit sixteen as a Traveller, a lot of us can decide if we want to leave secondary school or stay. Our other schools didn't give us any reason to stay.

*"I didn't like school very much so I wanted to leave."*

*"I left school at sixteen because I experienced racism from teachers."*

*"I wanted to stay in school. I wanted to do 4th year, 5th year, 6th year, all levels. But I didn't. I did not find teachers supportive so I got fed up with it and left."*

### **Not telling anyone my dreams**

I kept it to myself about wanting to do my Leaving Cert.

I kept my dreams to myself to protect myself.

Because if I didn't want to do it, then no one would say, oh why did you not do it?

### **Thinking what's the point?**

You get so used to racism every day that you think, what's the point? You think it doesn't matter what you say, it won't change anything. People will still be racist.

It's hard to get jobs as a Traveller even if you have a Leaving Cert so you might think, why even try to do my Leaving Cert?

### **Slowly giving up on your dreams**

You keep dreaming of the stuff you want to do but slowly, slowly you start giving up on it.

**Our dreams are precious.**

**We have a right to education.**

**Racism and discrimination shouldn't be happening.**

**This is wrong.**

## Some of our special knowledge and skills

### *Safety in numbers*

If there are more family and Traveller friends in school you feel safer. We feel other Travellers will support us if someone tries to bully us. You feel more comfortable talking with people you know. We tell each other if we experienced racism from teachers or not. We tell each other what teachers will help you.

### *The importance of family support*

Some of the ways parents have supported us have been listening to our side of the story, and being happy when we are happy with our lives.

*“My mother was always there for me. When I was going through a hard time in primary school, she tried to help me out. She would listen to my side of the story. She would talk to me and this would calm me down.”*

*“My father and mother are happy that I’m doing my Leaving Cert instead of being stuck at home from morning to night. They didn’t care whether I did it or not, but they’re happy that I’m happy and getting the job I want to get. They don’t tell me this in words but I can tell by their body language.”*

### *Respecting teachers who respect you*

In our culture, we are taught to have respect for other people. If an elderly woman came into the trailer, you’d get up straightaway. You wouldn’t have to be asked, you knew to do it. Since you were a baby upwards, you were told to be respectful.

When teachers show us respect, we show respect back. Teachers show respect by teaching us the same as the settled people.

### *Listening to teachers who help us and believe in us*

There are also a lot of teachers that would help you out. When a teacher helps you, you listen to that teacher. Teachers who help you with your stuff show that they are interested in you and that they believe in you. They’re not just letting you do whatever you want. They teach you the same as they teach the settled people.

“All the teachers here believe that I am going to get my full Leaving Cert. They know I have skills. They know I have ideas in my head, like I had an idea for a documentary about different cultures and about Travellers’ life stories.”

“The teachers believe in me and that I’m going to get a proper job. They helped me to make a plan to follow my dream.”

“Where I am now, I am doing my work to get a proper Leaving Cert and a full education. There are some days when I will not do anything for anyone. But most days, I push myself to learn new stuff.”

*“In primary school, a resource teacher helped me a lot with my anxiety. She would take me aside and talk with me. She gave me a stress ball that I could use in class”.*

*“I’ve had teachers who were understanding. If they were asking me questions and I didn’t know the answers I’d get very agitated. They’d have to ask slowly and I’d give the proper answer then.”*

*“Help to do the one question helps you on the way because you can do the rest of the problem or the exercise. It helps in the long term too.”*

Teachers who helped you with your stuff showed that they were interested in you and that they believe in you. They’re not just letting you do whatever you want. They teach you the same as they teach the settled people.

*“All the teachers here believe that I am going to get my full Leaving Cert. They know I have skills. They know I have ideas in my head, like I had an idea for a documentary about different cultures and about Travellers’ life stories.*

*“The teachers believe in me and that I’m going to get a proper job. They helped me to make a plan to follow my dream.”*

### **Pushing myself to learn new things**

*“Where I am now, I am doing my work to get a proper Leaving Cert and a full education. There are some days when I will not do anything for anyone. But most days, I push myself to learn new stuff.”*

I like learning new things. As a child, I was always learning new stuff. It could be a piece of paper and I could learn how to do something out of that paper. I learned stuff by watching someone in my family doing it, like doing makeup.

If I don’t understand something, I know if I keep doing it and keep trying I will understand it. I keep saying to myself, *don’t give up. I’m going to get that job.* This helps me to get the courage back up again to keep pushing myself to do my Leaving Cert so I can get the job I want.”

*“In primary school, a resource teacher helped me a lot with my anxiety. She would take me aside and talk with me. She gave me a stress ball that I could use in class”.*

*“I always said I will go for my dream job. I like doing hair. I like doing makeup so I’m sticking by that. From when I was younger, I was watching my sisters and my aunties all doing their makeup. So I kept watching them and eventually I know how to do makeup now.”*

### **Caring about the things I can control**

There are some things that are beyond my control. I try not to care about things I can’t control. Instead, I try and make things better for myself in other ways like doing my Leaving Cert.

### **Reminding myself that people from other cultures have it hard too**

There are many people from other cultures out there that are being treated differently and who experience racism, it’s not just Travellers: Black people, Ukrainian people, Pakistani people. I won’t change my culture for anyone. I don’t say, *“I’m not a Traveller”.* I am proud to be a Traveller.

# Our messages for teachers, principals and other Traveller students

## Our Message to Teachers

Treat all students equally. Don't just help settled people more than what you help Travellers.

Listen to your students, Traveller or not.

Keep telling other teachers to treat their students equally.

Give out to other teachers if they try to bully Travellers or any other student.

Show Travellers that you're interested in helping them and that you're going to push them to learn. Even if they get annoyed with you, keep pushing them. That tells them you believe in them and that you want them to follow whatever dream they want.

## Our Message to Principals

Treat everyone fairly and equally.

Have staff meetings and tell them to support Travellers in the same way they support settled people.

Include members of the Traveller community at the meetings because Travellers can explain more about what Traveller students go through. Settled people don't know the full story but Travellers know the whole lot.

Celebrate and learn about Traveller culture and history in school.

Make sure no student is excluded. If a student is left out, talk to the teacher.

There can be no tolerance for teachers who use racial slurs. If teachers show racism against students, they should be fired.

## Our Message for Other Traveller Students

Be proud of who you are. Don't change your culture for anyone.

Don't say, I'm not a Traveller. Tell them you're proud to be a Traveller.

Don't let people talk you down.

Finish school. Do your Leaving Cert.

Do not give up on your dreams! Keep going for your dreams!

## Appendix: Letter to Students

Dear Student,

My name is Siobhán Madden. I am a settled person involved with Galway Traveller Movement. My job is to gather and write down the stories of five young Travellers who attend secondary school in County Galway. We believe that this is important because many Traveller students say that their experiences, knowledge, skills, hopes and dreams are often not heard.

I am inviting you to be one of the five students who share their stories with us confidentially and with the consent of your parents. You would not meet the other students. The different stories will be put together in a small book. We hope that the stories will help other Travellers in school. We hope they will also help teachers to have a better understanding of what it can be like to be a member of the Traveller community in school.

Before you decide if you are interested in sharing your story, I'm sure you have lots of questions! Your questions are important. We'll do our best to answer them!

"Will it be confidential? Would people know it was me?" you might be asking. Your participation would be confidential and anonymous. This means that your name and the name of your school will not be told at any time. Your story will not be shared with other people until you agree the parts of your story that are written down. It is your story. You are the person who has the right to decide.

You might wonder, so what's the plan? How do you go about listening to the stories and writing them down?

Well, the plan is that you, me, and a member of the Traveller community from GTM that you trust would meet three times. The first time, we'll have a chat about what this is all about. We will answer any questions you might have. If you're okay to take part, then we'll have a conversation about your experiences in school, your culture and about the things and people that are important to you. I will write down your story. For the second meeting, you can tell me any bits you want to change or leave out. The third meeting will be an opportunity to read all the five different stories put together and to say what you think of it!

Thank you so much for taking the time to think about this. If you or your parents have any questions, we would be delighted to discuss them.

All the best for now, Siobhán

If you would like to participate

Please contact

Jane Ward

Galway Traveller Movement

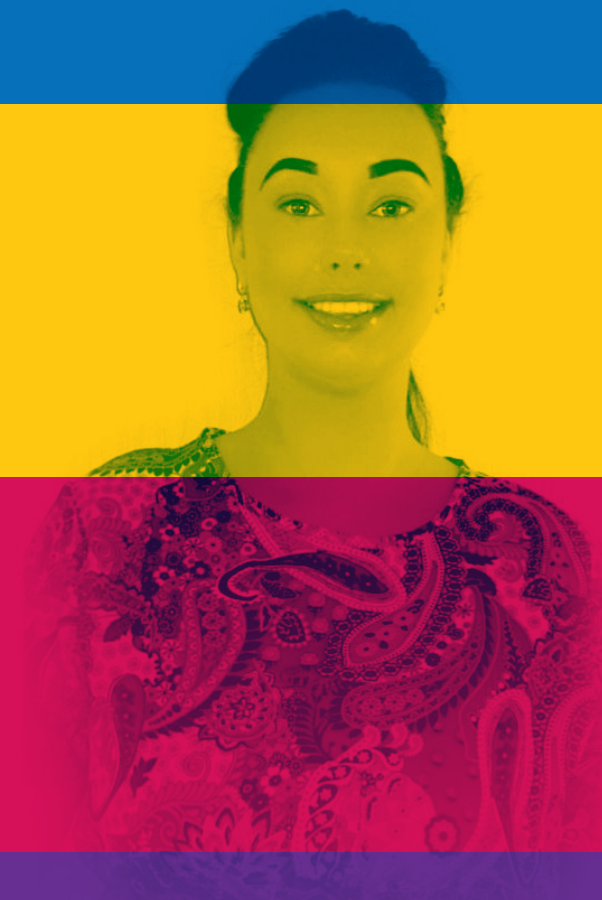
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**#FIGHT***Racism*

**#STALL***Racism*



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