Introduction

‘Traveller Children are a minority within a minority suffering all the ill effects of inadequate accommodation poor living standards and discrimination experienced by their parents’ (Murray, 1997). The children participating in this study come from the Traveller Community. The primary purpose of this report is to assess the views and understanding of Traveller children regarding their rights as individuals, as part of a community and in Irish society. It is important to set out the current context both in terms of the position of Travellers in Irish society and specifically the Traveller children engaged in this study. In addition this section outlines the background and methodology used in the study. The final section presents the findings and recommendations from the project.

Who are the Travellers?

Irish Travellers are a small indigenous ethnic group with a nomadic tradition whose presence in Irish society was first officially recorded in the 12th century. Travellers have a long shared history with common cultural characteristics and traditions evident in the organisation of family, language, social and economic life (Murray, 2002/2012). Travellers in common with the Roma community are recognised as one of the most marginalised communities in Europe and in Ireland. Travellers inhibit two worlds, the hostile settled world and their own Traveller world (Kenny et al. 2010).

In a report on his mission to assess the Human Rights situation in Ireland, Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, stated that:
‘Travellers have been subjected to discrimination and racism in the fields of education, employment, housing, healthcare, media reporting and participation in decision making’ (Council of Europe, 2007)

How you are viewed as a community by the state and by individuals in society has an effect on wellbeing and engagement within society. The state historically has had a very ambivalent relationship with the Traveller community and with nomadism. The Traveller community have been viewed historically by the state as a sub culture of poverty with an aligned deficit view of Traveller lifestyle.

The extended family is as important as the immediate family to the Traveller community. Living together and sharing a sense of peoplehood is emphasised within the community. The extended family is the embodiment of community for the Travellers and not a particular geographical location. While family is also considered important to the settled population their geographical location is generally associated with community.

In the past decade Traveller nomadic lifestyle has been constrained through legislation (Housing Miscellaneous Act, 2002 (Trespass Law). This law has caused considerable hardship for Traveller families and has forced many families into standard housing which inhibits their practice of living with extended family.

The constraint on nomadic practice means that some Travellers are shifting towards settled type economic activities and accommodation. This is not necessarily freely chosen (Kenny et al, 2010). It is a type of forced assimilation which is driven by official State policy. This constraint has led to isolation and loneliness for many Travellers, which in turn has had an effect on Travellers wellbeing and in some cases to serious mental health concerns (UCD, 2010).

In the recent Report Card from the Children’s Rights Alliance (2012), which examines whether the Government has honoured the promises it has made to the one million children living in Ireland, there are clear recommendations for improvements for Traveller children which include:
• Specify commitments to Traveller children in the second National Children’s Strategy, particularly in relation to education and health
• Recognise Travellers as an ethnic group and provide capacity for their representation at national policy level on children’s issues
• Evaluate the impact of the Visiting Teachers for Travellers Programme, which has been abolished (2010 austerity Budget).

It is within this context that we engaged 10 Traveller girls 12 to 13 years of age in a study on their views of their rights as Traveller children in Irish society.

Background information
The Traveller children participating in this study live in West Dublin a designated disadvantaged area. They live in a mixture of housing types including Traveller specific housing schemes, local authority housing and an unofficial halting site. The children living on the unofficial halting site in trailers (caravans) live at the end of an unlit isolated roadway. Running water is acquired from one communal tap, there is no electricity or toilet or washing facilities. Electricity comes from a family generator. The families generally use the local swimming pool facilities for showering. Some of the children live on Traveller only housing schemes that consist of small bungalows. The families living in the housing schemes have recently been subject to internal feuding and violent attacks. As a consequence an early childhood facility has been moved from the site considering it too unsafe for staff to work on site (this has been contested by the Traveller community). The facility is now provided in the local community. The children attend a local all girls secondary school. Over the past 10 years Traveller children have begun to access secondary education. To date only one young Traveller girl has completed their Leaving Certificate in the school as many leave at 15 following their Junior Certificate. Many of the parents of the children in this study would not have attended secondary school. In this study we engaged with Traveller girls only. In the context of Traveller culture there is limited contact between young boys and girls. As a consequence when boys and girls are in focus groups they are not always comfortable openly expressing their views and can be over inhibited or over excited. Parents are often not comfortable giving permission to young girls to attend external events with boys. In order to have the best outcome for the project we choose to seek the views of young Traveller girls and to access their availability through a local school. Many of the Traveller parents living in
West Dublin have an association with Pavee Point through youth work, advocacy and activism over the past 20 years. As a consequence we were confident that the parents would give permission for their children to participate in the study.

**Pavee Point** is a voluntary, or non-governmental, organisation committed to the attainment of human rights for Irish Travellers. The group is comprised of Travellers and members of the majority population working together in partnership to address the needs of Travellers as a minority group experiencing exclusion and marginalisation.

The aim of Pavee Point is to contribute to improvement in the quality of life and living circumstances of Irish Travellers, through working for social justice, solidarity, socio-economic development and human rights.

The work of Pavee Point is based on two key premises:

- Real improvement in Travellers’ living circumstances and social situation requires the active involvement of Travellers themselves.
- Non-Travellers have a responsibility to address the various processes which serve to exclude Travellers from participating as equals in society.

**Background**

The consultation was held in Pavee Point Resource Centre. The children were bussed into the centre which is approximately 6 km from their school. An initial meeting was held with the children in the school followed by 2 meetings in Pavee Point and a third meeting in the school. There were three female workers facilitating the consultation. Two workers worked with the children and one recorded the sessions on video, photographs and paper. At the first session we had 10 girls and 7 in the follow up session.

**Methodology**

The session began with an overview of the project which included a viewing of the DVD from Speak Up and imagery to support the young girls understanding of the project. Creative methodologies and group work were used as forums for addressing the key areas chosen by the children.
Preparation of the children

Through negotiations with the principal a meeting was held with the children in the school. The children had been given some brief information from the Principal about the project. We met with 15 children and introduced the project. The children were very excited and keen to be involved. Details regarding permission from their parents to participate in the Speak Up project was discussed at length. This was necessary to ensure parents were informed of Pavee Point involvement, venue, makeup of the group (girls only) and transport arrangements. Parents were informed that the girls would be with Pavee Point staff at all times and would be transported back to their homes. Parents were also given contact details. Some parents chose to call to discuss the project with the coordinator. All children received information on the project in writing for their parents and permission slips which had to be returned to the school before they could participate in the project. 10 out of the 15 interviewed volunteered to participate in the programme. The girls had not engaged in Human Rights Education although there is evidence that they discussed issues of poverty in Africa.

Programme/Methodology

The Project team used a variety of tools and activities that were most conducive to enabling the young people to express their views depending on their level of ability, interest and concentration. The tools included offering information using visual tools including the Speak Up film and other images to explore the European, national, local and individual dimensions to the project (see photos attached). To illicit their views a number of activities and methodologies were used including games, art activities, group work, drama and personal interviews. The information was recorded through video, photos, voice recorder and written documentation.

Location of the Focus group meeting(s),

The meetings were held in the Pavee Point office which is an old church building. There is a large main hall with several breakout rooms. The imagery in the building supports Traveller identity (see attached photos). The children are familiar with the building and are comfortable there.

We began the session in a breakout room starting with lunch sitting around the table chatting. For the introduction to the project we used the hall and sat in a semi-circle. The hall provided
space for activities, games and drama and the break out rooms for art activities and for individual interviews.

**Key Findings**

The Traveller children were very excited about the initiative. They were very interested in the idea that their views would go to Europe. To set the context we identified all participating countries on a European map (each child had their own map). We looked at the DVD Speak Up. The children were thrilled with this. At the beginning of our second meeting we introduced the structure of the project using imagery (see attached photos). The imagery was simple but gave an idea of the how their input linked to the European Commission. We identified the strata of that structure beginning the imagery of the children themselves, images of their community, the icons of Irish government and of the EU Commission. The idea was to link their input, their voice to the broader structures of society. At the beginning of both sessions we introduced the notion of Children’s Rights what was meant by children’s rights?

The areas identified by the children included: The Right to a ‘home, food, rest, friends, to vote, to move and travel, to speak, work and there should be no slave labour’.

We asked them what they thought was important in their life; playing in friends, their phone for chatting with friends, football and the cinema sometimes when they get to go and being treated equally.

1. **Children’s Awareness of children’s rights**

The children fully engaged with the children’s rights game. We broke into two groups and the children picked 5 rights per group. Then we came back into the main group worked with the children to choose the 4 rights of most importance to them collectively. There were two common rights chosen the right the Health and Education they then selected from the remaining rights:

- All children are equal Article 2
- All children have the right to play Article 31
- Children have the right to an identity Article 8
- Disabled children have the right to special care Article 23
- Children of minorities or indigenous population have the right to enjoy their own culture Article 30
• Children have to be protected from torture and deprivation of liberty Article 37
• No child should be maltreated Article 19/34

The four rights chosen by the children were:

➢ All children have the right to health care Article 24
➢ All children have the right to education Article 28, 29
➢ Children of minorities or indigenous population have the right to enjoy their own culture Article 30
➢ All children are equal Article 2

Despite it being clear that the children had to choose rights that were relevant for them and close to their living situations and their own experience we were struck by the empathy displayed by the children regarding children globally. They mentioned several times that children should not be maltreated, they shouldn’t have to work when they are children, they should be with their families and in particular that disabled children should be cared for. This reflection comes no doubt from the many campaigns targeting schools from Irish charities supporting Development Aid in the Developing world. Ireland has a long tradition of charity and development work in Africa and children in Irish school are exposed to campaigns from when they enter school at 4 years of age. The focus on the global does not translate into the national or local context for Traveller children. They are a different set of circumstances i.e. poverty and famine in Africa interestingly this does not translate to Traveller children identifying the unjust living circumstances in Ireland for them or their community.

Health
Traveller children live with the consequences of poor accommodation and life chances which manifest in poor health. The life expectancy of adults is lower than the settled population this is due to high mortality rates at an early age in the Traveller community. Traveller children are exposed to issues of health on a daily basis. Therefore it is not surprising that the right to health care was the top priority for the children ‘It just seems like a very important one’. They articulated the importance of health care for children regardless of background ‘Doesn’t matter where they come from’ which also indicates a knowledge of unequal treatment for particular groups.

Education
Education was a priority for all children. The children discussed the need to *read and write*. This is a view voiced by many Traveller families, the need to read and write to get a job. It indicates a narrow view of education (i.e. need to read and write) and the need for further expansion of the lens of Traveller children for broader expectations and opportunities in life and in their working life. One child commented that you need education ‘*so you won’t be stupid*’ which also indicates a possible internalisation of oppression ‘Travellers are stupid’.

**Being Equal**

The right to be equal was a unanimous choice when the larger groups discussed the next choice ‘*cause we all should be treated the same*’. The children said ‘*you should treat people like you want to be treated yourself*’ and that ‘*we are all the same on the inside*’. The children had all (bar one) experienced discrimination individually; they had all been followed around supermarkets and clothes shops. The recognition of the right to be equal is significant for Travellers.

**Culture**

The right to enjoy your own culture and the right to your identity were closely tied but the children chose the right to enjoy your own culture to best represent their needs. They felt that they should be able to enjoy their own culture, that many Travellers hide their identity to get a job or go places (pubs, hotels etc.) and they shouldn’t have to do this. ‘*They should be able to enjoy their culture*’. They felt that there was considerable discrimination against their culture. All rights chosen by the children had direct relevance to their lives and their discussion demonstrated that they had a good albeit limited understanding of the importance of these issues in their lives. It is not clear if children made the connection between the relevance of the issue in their lives and their ‘right’ from any political or legal level. While they knew they had a right to education and health they had very limited view on how it might change or how they could or how others could gain the right to a particular area. The older children in the group had a greater connection to ‘rights’ than the younger children. The younger children tended to shrug and say ‘*cause I think it*’ but if pressed for further information were unable to articulate their thoughts, even through drama or imagery, on why they thought something was important. The slightly older children could identify the ‘why’ of the issues.

**Session Two**
Children’s needs in relation to the four selected rights.
Following an explanation of the societal structures Traveller children and their life, their own community, the broader society including the political structure of the Irish government and the EU commission we outlined their chosen rights from the previous session. We revisited these rights through group discussion. This was followed by an arts session and then a personal interview on video for the ‘Speak up Television station.

All children are equal Article 2
The children had no problem relating ‘being equal’ to their current life circumstances. They spoke about their experiences in school, their visits to shops, supermarkets. They don’t tend to go out of their local community and as young girls they would have very little personal freedom. Some of the girls attend an all Traveller youth club in the areas supported by Pavee Point. The children were clear that they had a right to be treated equally and not discriminated against and their direct life experience demonstrates their awareness. In the group discussion the children however also differed in their opinions. Some felt they were discriminated against in school and some felt they were treated like the settled children. Those that felt they were discriminated against gave examples of common incidents where the Traveller children get into trouble and the settled children do the same thing but get away with it. Other examples were of settled children slagging (teasing) off their accents and or ‘copying my voice’ as one child recounted. (Travellers have an identifiable accent that settled people can identify easily although new immigrants have difficulty relating to this and to identifying Travellers). Traveller children are often subjected to derogatory name calling by the settle (country) children; the most prevalent word used to undermine Travellers is the word ‘knacker’. This word is highly insulting to the Traveller community and causes a lot of difficulties for Traveller children in school. It often leads to conflict and the Traveller children feel that that issue is not dealt with appropriately by teachers.

Knacker:
The word knacker’ comes from the association with the ‘knackers yard’ a place where old horses were slaughtered. Many people use the phrase ‘I am knackered’ which means I am very tired. The work ‘knacker’ is used as a slur on the Traveller community. Travellers have a long association of working with horses, buying and selling in markets and fairs throughout
the country. This association has led to the labelling of Traveller as ‘knacker’ meaning useless and less than.

More recently it has shifted in its social meaning and has come to refer to people living in disadvantaged areas or from perceived lower class, who are not Travellers. People who are perceived as unacceptable socially (as Traveller stereotypically are viewed in Irish society). The characteristics associated with ‘knacker’ include lower class accent, style of dressing, anti-social behaviour, petty crime, poor public housing and low educational achievement levels.

The children made reference to Traveller children excluded or not being allowed into some schools. They said it was ok in their area but if they moved to another area they may not be able to access another school. They reiterated that ‘Travellers have the right to be treated equally’. While they saw education as important they felt that settled people get more money than Travellers if they got a job (This is more a myth than reality). This led to a conversation about Travellers hiding their identity to access employment. The children felt this was ‘very unfair’. Traveller children have direct experience of sisters, brothers or cousins getting jobs (during the Celtic Tiger times) but in doing so hiding their identity in order to secure employment. Some Travellers who were accidently identified or who self-identified following a period of time on the job found that they lost their job, their responsibilities were curtailed or they were demoted especially if they had access to money (taking cash from customers). Travellers in the current economic environment will struggle to find employment even if they hide their Traveller identity.

The children also discussed their experience of discrimination; of being followed, stared at by people in town or by security when they go into shops. They spoke of exaggerating their behaviour when they discover they are being followed by security. In this way they are retaliating by trying to show that they didn’t care. It is perhaps their only way of fighting back. But unfortunately this behaviour maintains and reinforces their marginalisation amongst the settled community.

The Traveller children felt powerless to deal with the external experiences of going into a shop and being followed. Traveller children don’t have a voice to change their situation at
local or political level. They also listen to the experiences of their parents and see their powerlessness. The children also have awareness of other Travellers being excluded in schools, employment and cited examples such as the Dale Farm eviction in England as an example of settled people getting rid of Travellers. This shows that they are well aware of their marginalisation and the distain for their way of life. It also shows that they or their family follow the media coverage regarding exclusion of Travellers. They are aware of the absence of job opportunities and the need for Travellers to hide their identity to get jobs (employment). However they don’t have high expectations of their own outcomes in the education system or beyond. We found that they were unable to give voice to any type of solutions for any of their experience or the external problems they identified in their lives and for their community. They children have no experience of their voices being heard and /or of positive results from their expression of their difficulties (i.e. name calling in school).

All children have the Right to Education Article 28, 29

While the children were aware of the benefits of education for writing and reading and for possibly getting a job they also demonstrated in drama and in group discussions a less than enthusiastic relationship with the school system. They discussed how boring it was and while they felt the teachers did not discriminate against them they felt that the settled (country) children did and it wasn’t sorted out appropriately to their benefit or satisfaction by the teachers (they didn’t recognise the possibly prejudice or discrimination underpinning the situation). They did say that break their attendance of school for weddings, engagements and funerals (priority for families) and couldn’t understand why there was an issue with this ‘since teachers miss school too’.

Out of the group of 10 children only 3 were going to go forward and finish school or do their leaving certificate. They all agreed that it was good to have an education but this didn’t transfer to the children finishing school. They displayed a lack of value in the school system, in their prospects for getting a job and the broader view or value of the possibilities gained from a good education. Some said ‘it was good to have an education and that it would mean you could go to college’. One girl expressed her desire to go to college to be a beautician. There was no identification of more ambitious professions such as teaching, medicine or any other profession. Their horizons were very limited. While they recognised they had a right to
do their leaving certificate most of the children didn’t intend to complete their education.
When asked why they would leave education early some said that ‘that is what Travellers do,
when they are 16 they leave school’.

Travellers marry early. Traveller girls often see marriage as a way of getting their freedom.
They are restricted in their social life until they are married. Many young Travellers are
focused on getting married at 18 or 19 years of age and education takes second place to their
marriage preparations. Some of the young Travellers reiterated that school was boring, they
didn’t like it and they just wanted to leave.

**All children have the Right to Health Care Article 24**

Health was an important area for the children although they had very little to say about it. For
them they said ‘well you could be dead in your bed if you hadn’’t good health care’. Most of
the children just said it was important that they were treated well in hospitals or the local GP
(doctor). ‘They are real civil to my mam and dad’.

In a recent All Ireland Health Study ‘Our Geels’ (2010) shows that the ‘Traveller community
has a higher burden of ill-health than does the general population. Whilst Travellers would
appear to access hospital services more frequently than do others, their experiences of
the services are not as positive’ (pg. 80).

**Children of minorities or indigenous population have the right to enjoy their own
culture Article 30**

The children discussed the culture and ‘a way of living your life’ in the past ‘we lived in
wagons and tents’. ‘Travellers have their own language Cant and we speak it’. They talked
about the importance of the right to travel and to live in trailers and halting sites ‘it’s the
families own opinion where they want to live’. Some of the children said ‘we don’t travel
around’ and others chimed in well ‘my granny does and my cousins’. We discussed where the
children live and if they were happy with where they lived and all children said yes. This is
despite children living in some very difficult conditions (i.e. isolated unlit road in a trailer
with no water). The children were proud of who they were and where they came from.

We discussed their language Cant and whether they thought it a good idea to teach Cant in
school. All the children said no, it wasn’t a good idea to teach it as ‘we wouldn’t be able to
talk about the country (settled) children if they knew our language’. This is an indication of
the distance and hostility between Travellers and settled (country) relations. Despite being with the country children all day they generally do not mix outside school with the settled children and both groups would be critical of the way of life of the other.

We discussed the culture of living together with extended family. The children again reiterated that it was ‘an individual opinion of the family’. However they felt Travellers had a right to live together if they so wished. The older children in the group brought the Dale Farm evictions in England back into the conversation. They were unhappy about how the Travellers were evicted and felt it violated their right to live together which is important in Traveller culture. ‘Travellers have a right to live together’

Proposals for policies or actions

The children had limited solutions for their situation at local, national or European levels. However, the issues raised indicated the struggle for some children and their families. The comments below show financial concerns or difficulties. I have interviewed Traveller children over many years on their opinions and it is the first time Traveller children directly discussed the prices or were concerned about the financial situation of the family.

‘Stop making the rich richer and the poor poorer’

Put the prices in the shops down more’

The children asked for credit for their phones as their gift at the end of the sessions.

The children enjoyed the interactions and found the experience good.

Reflections

It is evident that the Traveller children can name rights which they feel are important in their lives, and they were able to discern which rights were relevant and pertinent in their lives from the rights outlined in the Convention (for example the youngest child identified play as a right but none of the older children did). The children failed (or we failed to support the children) however to identify the internal issues affecting their lives within their community. Internal roles and rules which suppress and hinder their rights as young girls or that also oppress their community from within.

Some questions:
• Are there alternative ways, alternative constructions for working with the Children’s Rights Convention which not only explore the external realms of children’s lives but also the internal?

• Does the importance of extended family and collective community relationships hamper Traveller children’s ability discuss their issues? For example some of the children tried to silence some of the other children’s attempts to say what they thought. Was there a line over which they shouldn’t say any more in particular situations? Protection of internal community affairs?

• Does the lack of exposure of their families and/or themselves at local, political levels affect their ability to identify solutions? Children named their external issues, named the emotion around the issues but were unable, for whatever the reasons, which could be multiple, to articulate any change or offer any solutions. They were powerless.

• Are the Rights of the Child constructed by the middle class for the middle class in a way that misses the point for Traveller or marginalised children?

The consultations were positive and we gained considerable insight into Traveller children’s understanding of their rights. However some of the responses were limited. Possible reasons for this may include:
- not being used to being asked for their opinion,
- not being used to being heard,
- cultural reluctance to share with the settled facilitator (although we had a trust relationship),
- lack of language to articulate and/or conceptual understanding of what was being asked.

While we used formal, creative and imaginative ways to engage the children and while the children engaged excitedly and willingly at many levels we failed to capture some issues below the surface of their understanding or recognition of their rights.