

**LEAP Action Learning Report 2014**

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| Topic area  (What) | Similarity in educational challenges between the Aboriginal students of Australia and the Traveller students of Ireland. |
| Context  (Where and When) | St John the Baptist Boys National School  Cashel, County Tipperary, Ireland  October, 2014  I was privileged to be the first Australian LEAP member to visit an Irish school. I was linked up with Will Ryan, principal of St John the Baptist Boys National School.  This school is one of three schools on the one site. There is also a girl’s national school which is also catholic based, and a small 2-teacher Church of Ireland school which is protestant based.  The government funds all these schools. In fact, the government of the Republic of Ireland administers over 3000 schools, outnumbering the schools in NSW. Ireland’s population is spread out and quite rural, thus the Irish school system has many small schools catering to small villages and hamlets. The fact that the government funds schools which are religiously denominational is different to what we are used to in NSW. I have been told that both Catholic and Protestant-based schools are accepting of students from alternate religions.  Of course, this is a result of Ireland’s strong religious past. The government is working to consistently administer all schools, but having to respect the historic nature and identity of the various schools across the country. Like other western societies, Ireland is finding that religion is losing its strong influence over time, but there are still many icons and routines that keep the religious base of the school very obvious.  The school board is headed by the local parish priest. The school’s foyer and corridors are adorned with religious items, the day started with a prayer at morning assembly, and scripture is a half hour session that occurs daily in class.    Cashel is one of the larger towns in County Tipperary. It has approx. 3000 people, and is the home of the “Rock of Cashel”, a castle that is a main attraction on the tourist trail. It lies about halfway between Dublin and Cork – about a 2 hour drive by freeway to either city. There are three other government schools in the town – two which cater for students with special needs and a high school.  St John the Baptist has about 300 students, a relatively big school outside of Dublin. Its community is considered to be low socio-economic status.    The Irish love their sport, as Australians do. The two sports most treasured however come from Gaelic roots. They are Gaelic Football, and Hurling, of which Tipperary is a powerhouse amongst the other 31 counties. Every boy dreams as he grows up of representing his county at the All Ireland Final at Croke Park. I was extremely privileged in being able to attend the 2014 final while staying there. (Tipp came second!)  The Gaelic language is still spoken, mainly by communities in the west of Ireland. However, the education system insists on teaching Gaelic to all students, and so language lessons in “Irish” as they call it are taught each day. Teachers may not be fluent in Irish but know enough to be able to converse to the students, and use the language for many other purposes during the school day. I was told that many students lose their grip of Irish once they leave school as there is little need for it in many eastern and southern communities which mainly use English. There is a national TV channel devoted to the language however, and all street signs are in both languages.  Of course, the Irish climate dictates many aspects and routines of school. The school opens its doors at 9am, and the boys walk through the foyer to stand statically in the school hall until the 9:20 start bell. The small size of the hall prescribes this. Morning tea and lunch breaks are short, being 10 mins and 30 mins respectively. Toilets are located within each classroom. The principal mentioned how it would have been good if the school had more hard surfaces rather than grass, as the grass becomes boggy during winter. Their uniform entails trousers, shirt and tie.  It was noticeable immediately that the Irish schools were not as well-resourced as NSW schools. Teachers do not receive any release from face-to-face time. The technology throughout the school was basic, and the school was planning fundraising days to purchase additional hardware. There was no library at St Johns Boys School. When I enquired about this, I was told that the student numbers had grown last year, so they were able to form a new class. However, to accommodate the new class, the library had to be disbanded and the books placed in classrooms across the school. There was no librarian. Other schools I visited had similar funding and resource issues.  Ireland enjoyed a period throughout the 1990s and 2000s called the Celtic Tiger, a time when the economy was prospering. However, in about 2007 the economy crashed, and has been hit hard till present. The schools are under-resourced for this reason. There are signs that the economy is beginning to pick up and the government may find more funds to better equip its schools in the future.  Like NSW, Ireland is looking to change its funding model for schools from a base that uses equations of student numbers to a needs-based system. Its collection of data in 2014 was “clunky” which involved the principals having to submit info about the profiles of their Year 2 students. Much of this information could not be accessed, and much had to be ‘estimated’ by principals. This is a start but they will need to greatly refine this method of collecting data to make it manageable, robust and accurate.  Principals and assistant principals get an allowance added to their salary scales, rather than receiving a wage for the position they hold according to school size and complexity. In the case of St Johns, the assistant principal received a substantially greater amount than the principal, because of her age and experience, despite the fact that the principal had a greater workload and responsibility.  The school was able to access counsellor support for assistance with students with special needs, but this was thin and spread between many schools.  There didn’t seem to be much coordinated collection of academic assessment data either on a school-based level or on a systemic level. The principal was addressing school based assessment at the time of my visit. The culture and working expectations of the school and system reminded me of how it felt to work in NSW schools 15-20 years ago. There wasn’t the intensity that teachers in NSW seem to be under in our schools today. A welcome example of this was in the way the entire staff would make it to the staffroom each morning tea and lunch, unless on duty, giving a feeling of a more relaxed atmosphere. This is in contrast to staff rooms in present NSW that seem to only ever have a portion of staff as many work through their breaks in order to keep up with their workload.  St Johns had a significant population of ‘gypsies’ in the school. These students come from families that can be transient or settled, live in mobile homes or public housing, and represent some of the most disadvantaged members of the community. In Ireland, these families are known as ‘Travellers’. They have their own distinct accent, and even have a ‘look’ that distinguishes a lot of them from the general populace (I started to pick up these subtle physical differences during my stay). There has even been an attempt by the travelers to be acknowledged as a different race of people within Ireland, but this has not been accepted. |
| Research methods  (How) | It became apparent very quickly during my visit to Ireland that the challenges faced by the Irish education system in accommodating Traveller students had many similarities with the challenges faced in Australia with Aboriginal students.  I was able to speak with a number of principals and other school staff about the issues around Traveller students.  I have read a number of publications on the topic from the Department of Education and Skills, Ireland including “Education Policy Outlook: Ireland (2013)” and “Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy (2006)” and “Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (2005)”. |
| Findings  (So what) | * Students from Traveller communities are seen by some as an ethnic minority. * The education system acknowledges and is working towards a way to redress the imbalance in educational outcomes between Traveller students and ‘settled’ students. * A diverse and inclusive educational environment is essential. Segregated education of Traveller students was still occurring in some instances into the 1990s. * The Traveller community suffers a high level of discrimination in Irish society. If Traveller culture is respected in schools, all children can learn that such discrimination is unacceptable. * It is important to address the complex challenges in Traveller education appropriately, recognizing that their culture and social patterns can be a result of exclusion and poverty. * Revise the curriculum to incorporate the history and cultures of the Traveller community. * Ensure regular attendance patterns, maintaining good communication with parents and caregivers so that education is not interrupted. |
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