

MINCÉIRS MENTAL HEALTH COURSE



Traveller Counselling Service

-EVALUATING A TRAVELLER LED COURSE IN MENTAL HEALTH FOR THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY



ABSTRACT

The Mincéirs Mental Health Course began in early 2021 as a Traveller specific and Traveller led course to empower participants to be mental health advocates for their community.

30 professionals took part online in the first course of its kind. This report describes how, and what happened.

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Thank you also to the students in Wexford Educate Together National School, for their beautiful hazel tree drawings, to mark National Traveller Mental Health Day.

Finally, thanks must go to the Course Coordinators Group (of which Thomas, Hazel and Emma are also part); Suzie McCarthy, Nancy Power, Margaret McDonagh, Richard Boyle, and Kerry Cuskelly, who provided the background information for this report.

The Transformative Research Cooperative (TRC)

The researcher is a member of the Transformative Research Cooperative (TRC); a cooperative of experienced researchers and practitioners with extensive experience in the field of further, adult, community, and development education. The cooperative is committed to the transformative capacity of education for individuals, communities, and the wider social and environmental world. Our research and facilitation work are grounded in participative, reflexive, dialogic philosophies, and practices.

Dr. Sarah Meaney Sartori

Dr. Sarah Meaney Sartori did her PhD with the Adult and Community Education Department in Maynooth University. Funded by the Irish Research Council, the research was a creative exploration of the experience of educational exclusion from the perspective of prisoners and youth. Currently, she is the research manager on College Connect, a programme aimed at widening educational diversity, and is focussed on educational inclusion for refugees, people with convictions and Travellers. She has worked as an adult educator for over 15 years, developing and delivering modules and programmes to a wide variety of groups. She works with and is trained in creative research methodologies, that is the creative editing of research data the purpose being to bring research out in the open for public engagement. She believes that research should disrupt the status quo and is best carried out with and by the communities for whom it is intended.



Cover Photo 1 - Representatives from Traveller organisations met President Higgins to mark the first National Traveller Mental Health Day, organised to raise awareness of mental health issues in the Traveller community and presented a hazel tree in 2020.

Cover Photo 2 – The hazel tree finds its home in Knock on the second National Traveller Mental Health Day 2021.

Foreword by Thomas McCann



The Mincéir Mental Health in The Community Course was the first of its kind and was the result of nearly four years' work; from the first conversation to the graduation. During that time, we explored options such as enrolling on existing courses, or partnering with Third Level Institutions to help them adapt existing offerings. When the significant barriers to entry faced by Travellers, and the lack of focus on the mental health experiences of the Traveller Community became clear, we decided to design our own course. It would be the first of its kind specifically for the Traveller Community.

The aim of the course was manifold: In the first instance, we wanted to educate members of the Travelling Community on issues pertaining to mental health – from the history of mental health care in Ireland, to the laws around mental health, the language and jargon of the medical community, the different models and approaches to safeguarding and healing. It was also proposed that we would have input from members of marginalised, aboriginal groups from other parts of the world. Finally, we were keen to empower members of the Traveller Community to advocate on behalf of Travellers regarding mental health issues.

The Mincéir Mental Health in The Community Course took place during the worst of the Covid 19 pandemic. This was a double-edged sword because on one level, it made the realisation of the course much more difficult, but on another level, it facilitated the inclusion of Travellers who would not otherwise have been able to participate. This allowed us to increase the capacity of the course from an original intention of 15, to the final number of 30, participants.

The establishment of a co-ordinating group to oversee the development of the course was a crucial element in its development and success. One of the things the course co-ordinators tried really hard to secure was QQI accreditation. After several conversations with the relevant people, it became obvious that the time, expense, and general red tape would preclude this happening this time around, at least. Naturally, this was very disappointing for both the participants and the tutors, and in some ways reflects how Travellers in Irish society are generally excluded. This, however, did not take away from the importance and richness of the course, which was greatly contributed to by the vast life experience that the participants brought to the weekly sessions. This added significantly to the learning of the participants and tutors alike. The course has, however, been endorsed by Mental Health Ireland, Mental Health Reform Ireland, and the National Traveller Mental Health Network.

In addition, we had a rigorous, robust, evaluation of the entire course - a copy of which you now hold.

For me, personally, this has been a very enjoyable, and enriching, journey, and provided me with a lot of learning and insight. I hope that everyone else who was involved with the course had a similar experience.

I would like to thank all the participants for their commitment, which saw them turning up every week for six months; the Co-ordinating group, who - even though they were very busy in their own work, gave a huge amount of their skills and knowledge to make this course possible.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the **Traveller Health Unit (THU)** for funding, and in particular, Concetta De Brun for her support.

Finally, I would like to thank **Dr. Sarah Meaney Sartori** who carried out the evaluation report. It is my hope the recommendations in this report will lead to an education system in Ireland that is more inclusive of Travellers and Traveller Culture, history, and traditions.

Thomas McCann
Director

PROLOGUE

I would hope that the participants who come on the course enjoy it
and that I enjoy it as well
Whether it's protest
or whether it's kind of community action
people have to enjoy it

It's a journey for me
Maybe that ties with Travellers and nomadism
...this leads on to something else
somewhere
I'm not sure what that something else is
but that's okay
not to know your final destination
where it's gonna land

Certainly, my family
other families who was travelling
didn't know where to stay
or where to go
That's the journey
part of the journey

Hopefully, it's leading somewhere else
And I think it is
but I think we decide that collectively

My hope is that we take it somewhere that brings about change

***Adapted from an interview with Thomas McCann,
Traveller Counselling Service, Feb 2021.***

Introduction

“What is mostly known are the issues the community faces, such as access to accommodation and educational pathways, barriers to employment, and mental health challenges. While we do experience these challenges to a highly disproportionate degree, they are not us nor the weight of us”.

- Oein DeBhairduin in Why the moon travels

The Mincéirs Mental Health Course was a 21-week intensive series of 2-hour workshops and lectures, for members of the Traveller community across Ireland. The course began in January 2021 and was Traveller led and specific to Travellers, who are or who wish to work in a relevant field, and who have an interest in advocating in relation to mental health on behalf of their community. The course brought together 30 participants with 15 experts in their field for discussion-based lectures and workshops on mental health issues specifically relevant to the Traveller community such as; Mental health with regard to Traveller lives and culture; Mental health needs of special populations; Stigma and discrimination and their effect on the wellbeing of the Community.

The first of its kind in Ireland, the Mincéirs Mental Health Course was the brainchild of Thomas McCann (Traveller Counselling Service) and Hazel Katherine Larkin and is endorsed by The National Traveller Mental Health Network (NTMHN); a collective of Travellers and Traveller Organisations across Ireland. The course is in direct response to the current mental health crisis, that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 lockdowns and evidenced by the high levels of suicide and self-harm, as well as by the high numbers of Travellers on medication for anxiety and depression.¹

‘Mental health issues do not know the difference between who is a Traveller and who is not. They do not discriminate. Only, they do’.² Travellers disproportionately experience issues around identity, sexuality, addiction, depression, anxiety, bereavement, PTSD and more; the roots of which stem from decades of racist and discriminatory policies, not least the 1963 Report from the Commission on Itinerancy, a report that problematised the community’s culture and way of life and established policy relating to Travellers for the next twenty years.³

¹ Quirke B., Staines A., Staines D., Sweeney M.R., Turner J., Ward A. & Whelan J. (2010a) All Ireland Traveller Health Study - Our Geels: Summary of Findings. University College Dublin, Dublin. Available from: https://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/AITHS2010_SUMMARY_LR_All.pdf

² Beanze Warde, M. (2021). *Martin Beanz Warde: Life and death of a superhero – and Traveller*. *The Irish Times* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/martin-beanz-warde-life-and-death-of-a-superhero-and-traveller-1.4488495>

³ Irish Traveller Movement. (2017). *Review of the Commission on Itinerancy Report*. [Online] Available at: <https://itmtrav.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ITM-Review-of-the-1963-Commission-on-Itinerancy.pdf>

According to the All-Ireland Traveller Mental Health Study in 2010, suicide accounts for 11% of all deaths within the Traveller community, which is between six and seven times higher than the national average⁴ and is similar to patterns observed in other Indigenous ethnic minorities globally (Inuits, Sami, Aboriginals, Maoris, Torres Straits Islanders, First-Nation Canadians), where the experience of discrimination is a common thread. A survey of behaviour and attitudes in 2017 found that 83 per cent of people in Ireland wouldn't hire a Traveller, regardless of education or experience.⁶ When a tribe experiences multi-generational and not implausible fear of extinction, on top of the racism, discrimination, stigma, inequality, and prejudice experienced from the outset, fear and anxiety will be apparent.⁷

Following an unsuccessful bid to have a mental health course specific to Travellers accommodated through a university, Thomas and Hazel decided to set up their own course. They pulled together a group of committed individuals, all acutely aware of the mental health difficulties for Travellers, to design and deliver a programme they believed would be of most benefit to participants and in turn to the community. In addition to the commitment of attending weekly two-hour sessions online, participants completed a learner record in the form of reflective learner journals, a poster and presentation project, along with an essay assignment.

The course is steered by a Course Coordinators Group, made up of members of the Traveller community and an equal number of members of the settled community, who share the common desire to create something; 'for Travellers, by Travellers... about Travellers, and accessible to Travellers.'

This report details the background to the Mincéirs Mental Health Course, how it came about, as well as the steps taken, and the methodology used to research and capture participant and stakeholders' expectations and experience of the course.

Part 1 provides the background to the Mincéirs Mental Health Course. The context in relation to Travellers and mental health issues for the community is described. Information on the Course Coordinators Group, who steer the course, the primary stakeholder The Traveller Counselling Service is detailed in this section, as well as the supporting stakeholder; The National Traveller Mental Health Network.

⁴ Abdalla S., Cronin F., Daly L., Drummond A., Fitzpatrick P., Frazier K., Hamid N.A., Kelleher C.C., Kelly C., Kilroe J., Lotya J., McGorrian C., Moore R.G., Murnane S., Nic Chárthaigh R., O'Mahony D., O'Shea B., Quirke B., Staines A., Staines D., Sweeney M.R., Turner J., Ward A. & Whelan J. (2010a) All Ireland Traveller Health Study - Our Geels: Summary of Findings. University College Dublin, Dublin. Available from: https://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/AITHS2010_SUMMARY_LR_All.pdf

⁵ McKey, S., Quirke, B., Fitzpatrick, P., Kelleher, C., & Malone, K. (2020). A rapid review of Irish Traveller mental health and suicide: A psychosocial and anthropological perspective. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 1-11. doi:10.1017/ipm.2020.108

⁶ https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_key_issues_affecting_the_traveller_community/2019-12-17/2/

⁷ McKey et al., Irish Traveller mental health and suicide

Part 2 details the research methodology used to capture and evaluate the project; pre-course and post-course surveys, focus groups with participants and stakeholders, and interviews with stakeholders and academic staff, as well as literature analysis.

Part 3 documents the findings from surveys and focus group interviews with course participants, and the focus groups with course coordinators. This section is divided in four, and focuses on; reasons for participation, participant experience, self-evaluation, recommendations and what could be done differently, and draws on the literature to discuss and validate the findings.

Part 4 takes a look at accreditation and assessment. The Mincéirs Mental Health Course was unaccredited, despite considerable efforts to secure accreditation. This chapter explores the challenge in relation to accreditation and assessment in detail and incorporates an interview with senior academics in the Adult and Community Education department in Maynooth University.

Part 5 the final section is a concluding chapter that summarises the evaluation report along with researcher observations and insights from the literature and draws on participant and stakeholder input to point to 'where next?'

The chapters or parts to this evaluation are divided by pages that feature transcript poems; which are created by the researcher from focus group transcripts with participants, or songs or poetry that provided inspiration during the writing of this report. Spoken word and participant voice is purposefully given centre stage in this report in recognition of the importance of orality and narrative to Traveller culture.

The Mincéirs Mental Health Course, while a response to a community in crisis, is also a celebration in that it is Traveller specific, and a community response driven by the community. The quote at the beginning of this section is by writer and educator Oein DeBhairduin, who seeks to pair community activism with cultural celebration. This report strives to capture both elements and to also showcase the enjoyment that was had by participants and course organisers, despite the seriousness of the topic. Creative arts are an important aspect of Indigenous cultures, and the use of creative arts has a curative effect on the mind, the body, the spirit, and the emotions in themselves.⁸ Traveller authors, artists, academics, activists, and allies are therefore drawn on and referenced throughout, in the aim of delivering a report written 'with' the Traveller Community rather than one written 'about'.

⁸ France, H. (2020). Creative Arts and the Indigenous Healing Circle Within an Indigenous Context. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*. 3 Vol. 54 No. 3. Pages 413–429.

GO, MOVE SHIFT

Born in the middle of the afternoon
In a horse drawn carriage on the old A5
The big twelve-wheeler shook my bed,
"You can't stay here," the policeman said.

Chorus

You'd better get born in some-place else.
So move along, get along, Move along, get along,
Go! Move! Shift!

Born in the common by a building site
Where the ground was rutted by the trail of wheels
The local Christian said to me,
"You'll lower the price of property."

Six in the morning out in Inchicore
The guards came through the wagon door.
John Maughan was arrested in the cold
A Travelling boy just ten years old.

Mary Joyce was living at the side of the road
No halting-place and no fixed abode.
The vigilantes came to the Darndale site
And they shot her son in the middle of the night.

Chorus

You'd better get born in some-place else.
So move along, get along, Move along, get along,
Go! Move! Shift!

**Extract from *Go, Move, Shift* by Ewan McColl
Additional verses by Christy Moore.**

PART 1

BACKGROUND TO THE MINCÉIRS
MENTAL HEALTH COURSE

PART 1: BACKGROUND TO THE MINCÉIRS MENTAL HEALTH COURSE

“For as long as my people have counted the years, We have belonged here. As steadfast as the mountains, As constant as the rivers, We are not searching, We are not lost”⁹

-Muni O Pavee/The blessings of the Traveller

1.1 Background & Context

The Mincéirs Mental Health Course was conceived by Thomas McCann of the Traveller Counselling Service, and researcher and educator Hazel Katherine Larkin. The course was designed in response to barriers they observed and believed impacted negatively on interest and uptake by Travellers onto other community mental health courses; barriers such as course fees and cultural relevance, and the Mincéirs Mental Health Course was therefore intended to offer an accredited, accessible, and more culturally appropriate alternative.

Irish Travellers first received official recognition of their indigenous status from the Irish Government in March 2017.¹⁰ Indigenous peoples are defined as the original inhabitants of a place and have traditional cultures and ways of life closely tied to the local land.¹¹ The Irish Traveller community, Mincéir, the Pavee, an lucht siúil – are different names for the community recognised as Ireland’s Indigenous nomadic people and ethnic minority.¹² Mincéirí have their own language known as Cant, referred to by some as Gammon, and identify politically as part of the wider collective of Gypsy, Roma, and Travellers, because of their historic mobility and the ongoing importance of cultural nomadism to their identity.¹³

⁹ Irish Traveller Poetry: Muni o Pavee/ The blessings of the Traveller. Available at: <https://keepingacampfire.blogspot.com/2011/03/poetry-muni-o-pavee-blessings-of.html>

¹⁰ Joint Committee on Justice and Equality (2017). Report on the Recognition of Traveller Ethnicity. House of the Oireachtas: Dublin

¹¹ Gone JP, Kirmayer LJ. (2020). Advancing Indigenous Mental Health Research: Ethical, conceptual and methodological challenges. *Transcultural Psychiatry*. 57(2):235-249. doi:10.1177/1363461520923151

¹² DeBhairduin, O. (2020). *Why the moon travels*. Skein Press: Ireland

¹³ Haynes, A., Joyce, S., & Schweppe, J. (2021). The Significance of the Declaration of Ethnic Minority Status for Irish Travellers. *Nationalities Papers*, 49(2), 270-288. doi:10.1017/nps.2020.28

"Nomadism refers to a mindset, not just to the act of Travelling" ¹⁴

Traveller was the term put onto Travellers because of their nomadic identity, an identity that has been penalised and criminalised since anti-nomadic legalisation was first introduced by the British during the 1500's, and which the Irish state inherited but did nothing to repeal.¹⁵ The origins of violent confrontation between the settled and nomadic way of life are said to have existed since the dawn of time.¹⁶ Although the vast majority of Travellers are no longer nomadic,¹⁷ settled majority definitions of nomadism distinguish only between people who are mobile and those who are not, and fail to understand cultural nomadism and what Traveller ethnicity brings to¹⁸ the lived experience.

Cultural nomadic values include; the extended family, rituals surrounding death, economic self-sufficiency and flexibility in employment, and independence.¹⁹

Governments, that have failed to understand either the fluidity of movement in nomadic communities, or cultural nomadic identity that does not involve mobility, have led to inappropriate and culturally decimating accommodation policies for Travellers.²⁰

This fuels the notion that regards 'unsettled' people as 'failed settled people' and therefore racially inferior and is at the root of widespread racism against Travellers.²¹

Maintaining mental health can be a challenge for all members of Irish society, but when this is combined with the experience of racism, exclusion, and discrimination that the Traveller community has experienced, the challenge is greater.²² Widespread negative descriptions and images about Travellers disseminated to the public that undermines Traveller identity reinforce the notion of Traveller dysfunction and inferiority, contribute to internalised oppression and racialisation amongst the community, and compound psychological distress.²³

¹⁴ The Traveller Counselling Service

¹⁵ Donahue, M., McVeigh, R. & Ward, M. (2006). 'Misli Crush, Misli: Travellers and Nomadism', a research report for the Irish Traveller Movement and Traveller Movement (Northern Ireland), ITM, Dublin.

¹⁶ Joyce, S. (2018). A Brief History of the Institutionalisation of Discrimination Against Irish Travellers. Available from: <https://www.iccl.ie/news/whrdtakeover/>

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ James, Z., & Southern, R. (2019). Accommodating nomadism and mobility: Challenging the sedentarist binary approach to provision for gypsies, travellers and roma. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 39(3/4), 324-336. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-10-2018-0177>

¹⁹ Delaney, P. (2003). *A Sense of Place: Travellers, Representation, and Irish Culture*. Dublin: The Ireland Institute.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Joyce, S. (2015). 'Divided Spaces: An examination of everyday racism and its impact on young Travellers' spatial mobility'. *Irish Journal of Anthropology*, 18(1), ISSN: 1393-8592

²² <https://travellercounselling.ie/the-traveller-community/traveller-mental-health/>

²³ Ibid p.157

Travellers have been known to temper their own behaviour so that they do not fit the perceived stereotypical view of Travellers, and even to apologise for speaking out in response to oppression or discrimination.²⁴ Internalised oppression, originating from whereby people are disallowed or unable (because it's too dangerous or risky) to express anger and frustration, turns these feelings inward to be directed at oneself and/or family/community.²⁵ This anger can be expressed in violence, for example, through domestic violence, sexual abuse, suicide, or murder (of one's own people). It can also be expressed more subtly through depression, low self- (or community) esteem, apathy, substance abuse, or mental illness.²⁶

The mental health crisis of the Traveller Community has been described as a significant human rights issue, that the State has failed to address despite the appallingly high levels of suicide.²⁷ 'When a community implodes on itself questions need to be asked... questions about educational opportunity, employment possibilities and social, political, cultural participation'.²⁸ It is highly likely that many Travellers feel inherently less safe because of their ethnicity.²⁹ Young Travellers, living with the anticipation of hostility and discrimination, use tactics such as 'compliance' and 'hiding in plain sight', paralleling in evidence with the tactics and logic used by young black men in the U.S.A.³⁰

In a focus group conversation about the benefits of this course being specific to Travellers, the word 'safe' was used 10 times. Furthermore, taking part in a course made up entirely of Travellers negates the need to be the 'Traveller representative', as the racialisation of Travellers constructs each individual as a 'representative' of the community.³¹ This issue was summed up and highlighted succinctly by one course participant;

²⁴ Lawrence, K. (2017). Traveller outcomes in education: A Traveller perspective. Unpublished thesis: Maynooth University. Available at: https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Kathleen%20Lawrence%20Thesis_0.pdf

²⁵ France, H. (2021). Within Indigenous NA Context: Healing Circle, Counselling and Creative Arts. Presentation to the Mincéirs Mental Health Course June 2021.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The Irish Times (2019). 'Mental health crisis' among Travellers must be addressed, committee told. Most Travellers felt the State was 'indifferent' to their suffering. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/mental-health-crisis-among-travellers-must-be-addressed-committee-told-1.4043847>

²⁸ McDonagh, R. (2011). Article on Knuckles in Realisation of Traveller and Roma Women's Rights – Exploring Feminist Analyses. Available at: <http://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Articles-by-Rosaleen-McDonagh.pdf>

²⁹ Mulcahy, J. (2019). Excluded from the world: the impact of trauma, racism and social inequity. Presentation to the Seanad Public Consultation Committee on Travellers: "Towards a more equitable Ireland".

³⁰ Joyce, S. (2018). Mincéirs Siúladh: An ethnographic study of young Travellers experience of racism in an Irish City. University of Limerick: Limerick.

³¹ Ibid p. 156

“We've all been in different courses, and we feel like, you know...the tokenistic Traveller to answer the questions on behalf of your community”.

– **Course Participant**

The Traveller Community has a long and proud history of organising to advocate for Traveller rights, with many charismatic and outspoken leaders who challenge anti-nomadism and anti-Traveller racism at the highest levels.³² Advocacy work, within the arena of Traveller Mental Health Initiatives has been viewed as important, given that mental health services experience such high demand and there is often little opportunity to advocate for the Traveller Community to the appropriate agencies.³³

Dr. Brigid Quilligan, director at the Irish Traveller Movement, in an address to the Oireachtas in 2019 posed the following question; ‘why would someone turn to the person who has hurt them to heal them?’.³⁴ Travellers, especially male Travellers, who present for mental health services are often treated in an ‘off-hand way’ and asked questions which settled people are never asked, such as whether they are facing any criminal charges. These are factors that contribute to the feelings of hopelessness and isolation which many Travellers experience.³⁵ Traveller input is key when it comes to finding solutions to the Traveller mental health crisis,³⁶ and the concept for the Mincéirs Mental Health Course centres around the idea of resourcing and empowering the community to respond and advocate for its people on the ground who are struggling.³⁷

³² Joyce, S. (2018). *Mincéirs Siúladh: An ethnographic study of young Travellers experiences of racism in an Irish city*. University of Limerick. P.154.

³³ Traveller Mental Health Initiatives Evaluation Report August 2020. Available at: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/primarycare/socialinclusion/about-social-inclusion/news/s3-hse-mhi-evaluation-final-051120.pdf>

³⁴ Minnie Connors addressing the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community debate- Tuesday, 24 Sep 2019. Available at: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_key_issues_affecting_the_traveller_community/2019-09-24/3/

³⁵ Ibid Brigid Quilligan addressing the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community debate

³⁶ <https://www.paveepoint.ie/traveller-input-key-to-unlocking-the-traveller-mental-health-crisis/>

³⁷ Mincéirs Mental Health Course Coordinators’ Focus Group 26th February 2021

1.2 The Course

"Part of our expectation...for the outcomes of this course, is that we will have Travellers qualified, capable and competent to go into mental health settings, and speak with and on behalf of Travellers. And that they will be well capable to write letters ...to advocate on behalf of Travellers who are in the mental health system, who are service users".

-Course Coordinators Group Participant

MINCEIRS MENTAL HEALTH

A TRAINING COURSE TO EMPOWER PARTICIPANTS TO ADVOCATE FOR TRAVELLER MENTAL HEALTH

Are you a member of the Traveller community?

Are you interested in the area of mental health?

Are you interested in advocating for your community?

If so, this course might suit you!

Deadline for applications: Monday November 30th

The Minceirs Mental Health course will run as follows:
Every Wednesday starting Jan 2021— June 2021
10am-1pm
Course will be delivered online (with I.T. support)

To find out more and to apply contact Thomas McCann at:
training@travellercounselling.ie
or 085-8616681

This course is run through the Traveller Counselling Service

What do I need to do to get on the course?
The course is aimed at Travellers who are 18+
Complete and pass an interview
Literacy issues can be accommodated

Traveller Counselling Service

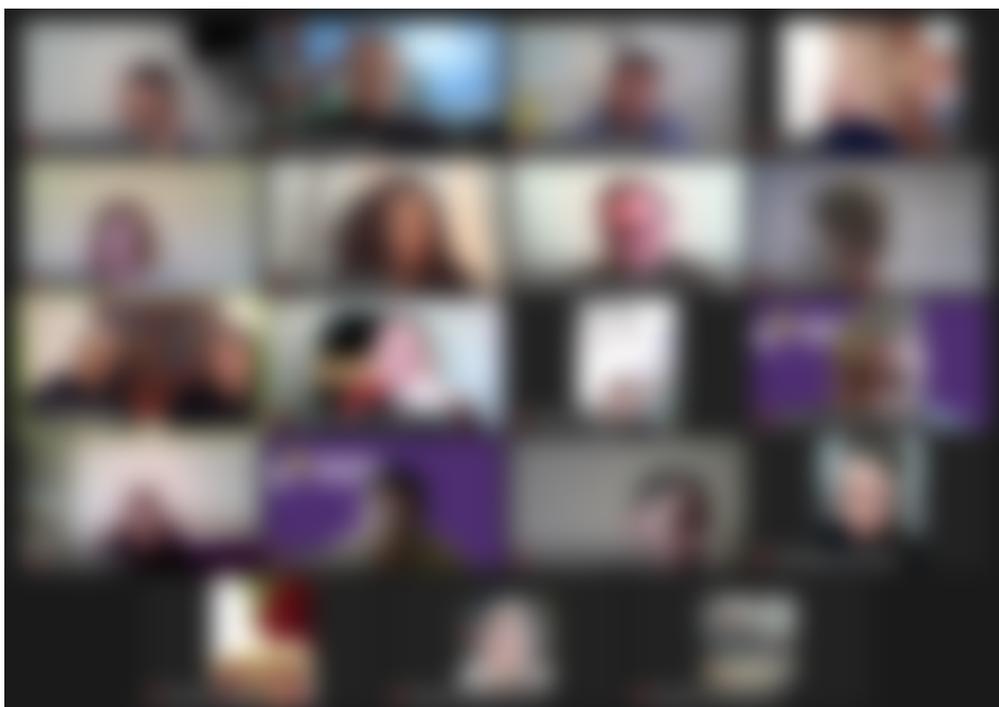
The Mincéirs Mental Health Course started in January 2021 and ran for 21 sessions until the end of June 2021. 30 participants began the 21 weeks online (due to the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions) and attended weekly two-hour sessions. 20 participants completed the course. A poster call for participants (p.19) was put out through Traveller organisations and the Traveller Mental Health Network. The course was originally intended for 15 participants, and because of the Covid-19 lockdown and the need to pivot to online learning, there were fears that perhaps 15 was too ambitious a number. When 30 applications were received to the course, it was attributed as being down to the speed in which Traveller organisations had adapted to the pandemic, and Travellers currently working within Traveller organisations and the area of Traveller mental health, who were interested in taking part.

“The Traveller organisations went online. I mean, they didn't stop working, they adapted, and they changed. And so, a lot of the people working within the Traveller organisations were moving on to Zoom meetings and things like that anyway, so they were certainly keeping up with everybody else who was doing that.”

-Course Coordinators Group Participant

A dedicated IT person was appointed, so as not to disadvantage participants who were not as comfortable online. Links were made with participants' local Traveller organisations to help tackle any blocks to participation such as; access to WIFI, access to a device, childcare, or literacy support. It is important to note that Ireland was impacted by full and nationwide school closures from January to March 2021 and parents and guardians were expected to provide emergency education in the form of 'home-schooling' for their children for the duration of the closures. Consequently, there were some participants who were not able to proceed with the course at this time.

The move online was embraced as an opportunity to engage relevant experts in the field, and also to incorporate an International perspective with the inclusion of workshops on International Indigenous Mental Health. International input was therefore included in the course structure from Aboriginal and First Nations Canada contributors. The table below provides an outline of the course structure over the 6-month period.



Mincéirs Mental Health Course Overview

WK	Theme	Delivered by
1	Introduction to Course	Thomas McCann , Traveller Counselling Service & Coordinators Steering Group Hazel Larkin , Educator & Researcher and Thomas McCann , Traveller Counselling Service
2	The history of mental ill health in Ireland	Thomas McCann , Traveller Counselling Service
3	Mental health / mental ill health, with regard to Travellers' lives & culture	
4	WRAP – Wellness, Recovery, Action Plan (Part One)	
5	WRAP – (Part Two) & Research Session 1	Sandra McDonagh , Traveller Mental Health Social Worker & Derek McDonnell , Psychotherapist, Big Picture Consultancy
6		Sandra McDonagh , Traveller Mental Health Social Worker & Dr Sarah Meaney Sartori (Researcher)
6		School Mid Term
7	Critical models of mental health	Padar O'Grady , Paediatric Psychiatrist
8	Sexuality and mental health & Research Session 2	Hazel Larkin , Educator & Researcher & Dr Sarah Meaney Sartori (Researcher)
9	Addiction and mental health	Christy Moorehouse , Daish Project
10	Conflict – in particular inter-familial conflict and mental health	Cris McDonagh & Frank Kavanagh - Traveller Mediators, Traveller Mediation Service
11	Mental Health Needs of Indigenous Populations 1 - Aboriginal Input - TIME CHANGE	Regan Mitchell , Siobhan Bryson & Karlie Stewart , Aboriginal Facilitators, New South Wales, Australia
12		Easter Holidays
13		Easter Holidays
14	Mental Health Needs of Indigenous Populations 2 - Aboriginal Input - TIME CHANGE	Regan Mitchell , Siobhan Bryson & Karlie Stewart , Aboriginal Facilitators, New South Wales, Australia
15	Current mental health policy in Ireland	Yvonne Murphy , Mental Health Reform Ireland
16	Irish mental health legislation & Poster Preparation (30 mins)	Hazel Larkin , Educator & Researcher
17	Adverse Childhood Experiences, their long-term effects, and mental health	Dr. Jane Mulcahy
18	Key policies for mental health practitioners 'on the frontline'	Kerry Cuskelly , Senior Social Worker HSE
19	Mental Health Needs of Indigenous Populations - First Nations	Prof Honoré France , Ani-yun-wiwa First Nation, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership studies, University of Victoria, Canada
20	Suicide prevention - Storm Introduction	Beatrice Hughes , Storm facilitator
21	Culturally Competent Toolkit	Thomas McCann , Traveller Counselling Service & Liz Haze , Coporate Community
22	Stigma, discrimination, and their effect on the wellbeing of the Community	Margaret McDonagh , Community Development worker & Nancy Power , Joint Director of Traveller MABS
23	Terminology/jargon of mental health professionals and practitioners & Research Session 3	Kerry Cuskelly , Senior Social Worker HSE & Dr Sarah Meaney Sartori (Researcher)
24	Poster presentations	Hazel Larkin , Educator & Researcher
25	Wrap up session & Pathways	Thomas McCann & Coordinators Steering Group
Graduation Celebration - Wynns Hotel, Dublin		

1.3 The Traveller Counselling Service

Thomas McCann established the Traveller Counselling Service in February 2008, initially as a one-year pilot project which has since developed into a community-based counselling service for the Traveller community. The service comprises of six qualified counsellors and psychotherapists and a manager; who is also a psychotherapist and supervisor. On par with other Indigenous communities, such as First Nations people, who perceive mental health care services to be inaccessible and culturally insensitive,³⁸ there is broad recognition that health services and other public services in Ireland need to be culturally inclusive if there is to be uptake by Travellers.³⁹



The Traveller Counselling Service operates from a culturally inclusive framework which respects Traveller culture, identity, values, and norms, and works from a perspective of culture centred counselling and psychotherapy. The service is an independent organisation with registered charitable status and has a board of directors which is made up of members

³⁸ Nuttgens, S. & Campbell., A. (2010). Multicultural Considerations for Counselling First Nations Clients. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*. Vol. 44 No. 2. Pages 115–129.

³⁹ WIT. (2017). Traveller Cultural Awareness Training Programme Evaluation. HSE.

of both the Traveller community and the majority community. Its purpose and vision is to provide culturally inclusive counselling to members of the Traveller community, where Travellers feel their beliefs, values and way of life are respected, while supporting mainstream mental health services to do the same. While the service is owned by the community, in particular through the management of the service which shapes how it should be delivered, it simultaneously acknowledges the diversity within the Traveller community, respecting each individual and their right to privacy.

Thomas McCann is a member of the Irish Traveller community and a long time Traveller activist. A former director of the Irish Traveller Movement, he was instrumental in campaigning for the Equal Status Acts;⁴⁰ which prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation, and education for members of the Traveller community, and the Traveller Accommodation Act⁴¹ that obliges local authorities to draw up five-year Traveller Accommodation Programmes. The Traveller Counselling Service explicitly acknowledges the racism, exclusion, and oppression that Travellers experience due to their cultural identity and the impact of this on daily lives and mental health.⁴² Improving access to culturally appropriate mental healthcare has been recognised as a key to addressing the often-greater burden of mental health issues experienced by Indigenous populations.⁴³

Therefore, the Mincéirs Mental Health Course was seen as a way of responding to the complex intersection of general mental health issues and Traveller specific issues such as; socio-economic exclusion, cultural issues (e.g., nomadism, language, horse-keeping), racism and discrimination, accommodation, educational disadvantage, unemployment (84% of Travellers are unemployed), gender issues (e.g., the impact of living in a strongly patriarchal culture), service provision (Travellers are often not linked to any services), addiction issues, conflict and violence.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Equal Status Acts 2000. Available at: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2000/act/8/enacted/en/html> Traveller

⁴¹ Accommodation Act 1998. Available at: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/33/enacted/en/html>

⁴² <https://travellercounselling.ie/meet-the-team/>

⁴³ Reifels, L., Nicholas, A., Fletcher, J., Bassilios, B., King, K., Ewen, S & Pirkis, J. (2018). Enhanced primary mental healthcare for Indigenous Australians: service implementation strategies and perspectives of providers. *Global Health Research and Policy*. 3:16 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41256-018-0071-1> National

⁴⁴ Traveller Mental Health Network. (2018). National Traveller Mental Health Network Strategic Plan 2019 -2021. Available at: <https://travellercounselling.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/National-Traveller-Mental-Health-Network-Strategic-Plan.pdf>

1.4 The National Traveller Mental Health Network

The National Traveller Mental Health Network (NTMHN) is a Traveller led collective of Travellers' (and allies) from across the country, who are all intensely aware of the mental health difficulties within the community. The Network was established due to the current crisis in Traveller mental health, and both the Network and its strategic plan were launched in March 2019.⁴⁵



The key recommendation in the strategic plan is the need for the implementation of a National Traveller Mental Health Strategy.⁴⁶ This was recommended in 2018 by the Joint Committee of the Future of Mental Health Care, and would have ring-fenced funding in order to address the significant deterioration in mental health for Travellers. This should also include the implementation of an ethnic identifier, and cultural competency training, for all staff.

Almost two years later, in July 2020, the National Traveller Mental Health Network called on the government to action its own recommendation: Specifically, they asked for the commencement of a consultation process, and the establishment of a mental health steering group to oversee the development and implementation of the strategy.⁴⁷

The NTMHN also calls on the government to deliver on this in the next three to five years. This request from the National Traveller Mental Health Network to the Irish government further highlights what the Network refers to as the many 'false dawns' when it comes to government policy on Travellers.

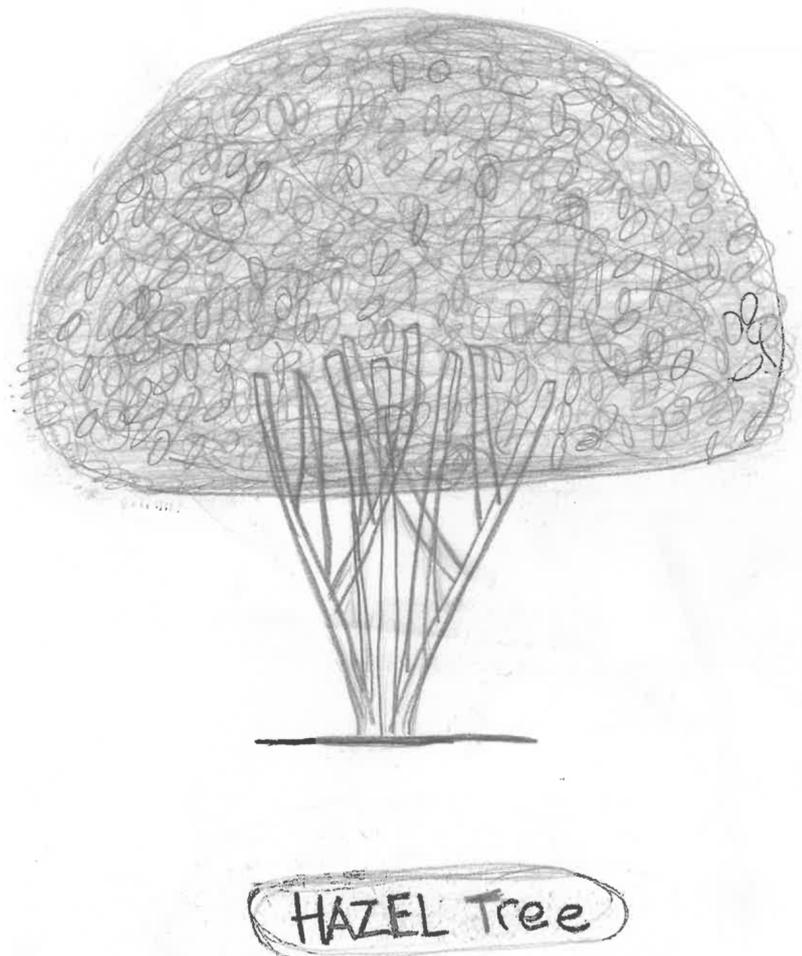
⁴⁵ National Traveller Mental Health Network. (2018). National Traveller Mental Health Network Strategic Plan 2019 -2021. Available at: <https://travellercounselling.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2019/08/National-Traveller-Mental-Health-Network-Strategic-Plan.pdf>

⁴⁶ Joint Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care Final Report. October 2018. Available at: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/committees/32/future-mental-health-care/documents/>

⁴⁷ Fagan, M. (2020). Government must tackle 'silent killer' of suicide in Traveller community. Irish examiner. Available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40020302.html>

I went out to the hazel wood, Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand, And hooked a berry to a thread;
- **The Song of Wandering Aengus by William Butler Yeats**

On the 8th of October 2020, the National Traveller Mental Health Network launched the first National Traveller Mental Health Day, to raise awareness of mental health issues in the Traveller community and to generate hope within the Traveller community. Representatives from Traveller organisations met President Higgins to mark the first National Traveller Mental Health Day, organised to raise awareness of mental health issues in the Traveller community. Nancy Power, Thomas McCann and Margaret McDonagh presented the President with a hazel tree, symbol of Travellers' strength, history and resilience, and President Higgins invited his guests to ring the Peace Bell at Áras an Uachtaráin. Activities organised to mark the National Traveller Mental Health Day and to show solidarity with the Traveller community include; schools or childcare facilities making, drawing, or decorating a tree with messages of hope or prayers for those who have passed; a walk or mass; tree-planting or memorial ceremony; the wearing of the NTMHN pin.



A SAFE SPACE

We've all been on different courses
you're the only person at that table
It kind of puts you off
fear of being judged maybe
or some type of the tokenistic Traveller
to answer the questions on behalf of your community

Travellers need to learn from Travellers
there's a better understanding of traditions
and the culture and the community
the expectations that's put on Travellers
and the pressures put on people

It creates a safe space to talk
A good Traveller, safe place to say, 'derogatory?'
'Sorry, I don't know what that means'
'Strategic plans?'

But we have to learn the jargon
to be part of the system
to get tools around how to be able to support
to advocate on behalf of family members or friends
for people who have lost family members by suicide

...and it's okay not to be okay, and to talk

**Excerpted from a focus group transcript with
course participants on the Mincéirs Mental Health Course
- March 2021**

PART 2

EVALUATING THE MINCÉIRS MENTAL HEALTH COURSE

PART 2: EVALUATING THE MINCÉIRS MENTAL HEALTH COURSE

“And even when we talk about Traveller culture and discrimination and racism. We can chat here between us, but you haven't a clue. You don't know what it's like to wake up from the day you're born, and that you're a hindrance, because you're a Traveller.”

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

2.1 The Research Methodology

The methodological approach for the evaluation of the Mincéirs Mental Health Course involved pre- and post-course evaluations, which took the form of surveys and focus groups. There were also recorded focus group interviews undertaken with the Course Coordinators Group with regard to the structure and set up of the course, which was triangulated with senior staff from the Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE) in Maynooth University in relation to accreditation.

With course participants, there were two facilitated and recorded research sessions along with the pre- and post-course surveys. In the pre-course survey, participants were asked to self-assess on a Likert scale how knowledgeable/confident they felt engaging with aspects of mental health advocacy for their community. They were also asked to self-assess their understanding of the root causes of the Traveller mental health crisis, as well as their knowledge of the mental health issues faced by other minority Indigenous cultures.

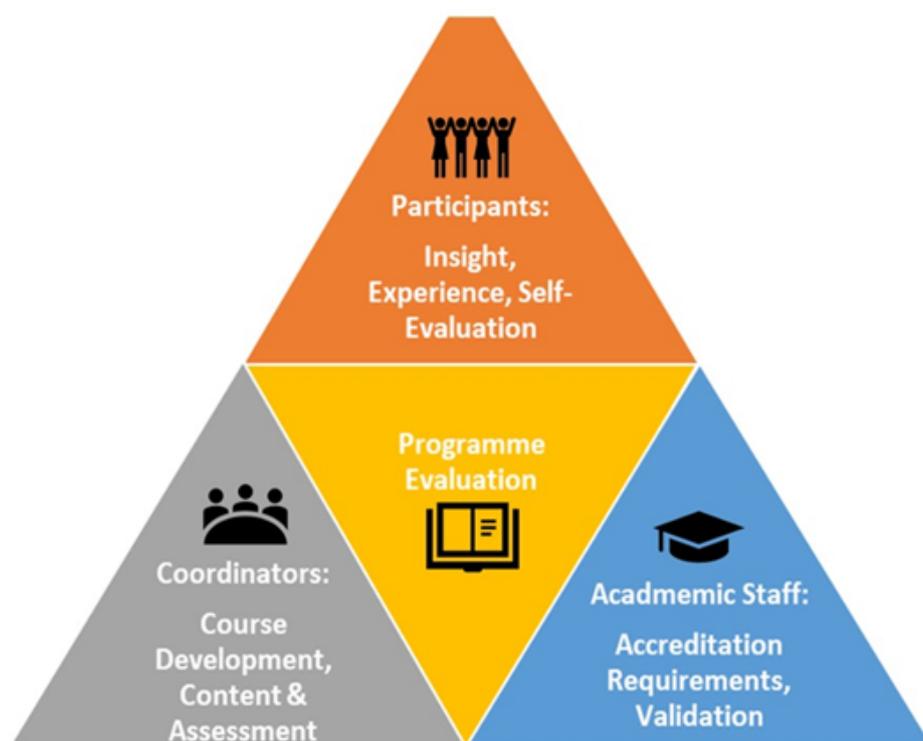
In the pre-course/early course focus group, participants took part in a semi-open discussion about their reasons for signing up on the course; why it was important that the course was Traveller-specific, and how they felt about the course being run online as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, the wider group was split into four smaller groups to discuss the following questions:

- **Discussion Question 1** - Why was it important for you to sign up to this course? Can you say more about this?
- **Discussion Question 2** - Is it important to you that the course is specific to Traveller Mental Health? Why?
- **Discussion Question 3** - What are some of the advantages and disadvantages for you in having this course take place online?

In the post-course survey, participants were asked the same questions on a Likert scale to self-assess their confidence and knowledge post-course. In the post-course research session, course participants discussed their experience of the course, and were invited to make recommendations as to how things might be done differently or improved. In this research session, the group considered and discussed the following questions in an open forum:

- **Discussion Question 1** - What do you think you have gained from this course?
- **Discussion Question 2** - What particular parts of the course did you find most interesting/helpful? Was there anything you didn't find helpful/useful? Why?
- **Discussion Question 3** - What would you change about the course if it were being run again?
- **Discussion Question 4** - If there was a follow-on course, is there anything in particular you would like it to focus on/specialise in?
- **Discussion Question 5** - Where next? What should happen going forward?

The research for this evaluation therefore focused on capturing three linked elements to put forward a robust evaluation; **Participant Experience** and self-evaluation of participation on the Mincéirs Mental Health Course; the **Course Coordinators'** input in terms of course design, content, development, and assessment; Input from **Academic Staff** with direct knowledge and experience of community education and accreditation.



Every effort was made in the development of the research element of the Mincéirs Mental Health Course evaluation, to try to ensure that the process facilitated ownership for course-participants as well as the course-coordinators and acted as a complement to the project through the use of dialogical, democratic, and participative methodology. Travellers have long been the subject of scholarly attention, and there has been specific criticism of past-practice in Traveller related research,⁴⁸ where 'settled' researchers declare themselves 'experts' on Travellers,⁴⁹ and where much of the literature is written from a 'settled' perspective.⁵⁰

"Not knocking academics and some great academics and some not so good academics...but otherwise, it'll be all about, you know, you're an object. Yeah, an object rather than a subject."

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

The direction for this evaluation was taken in consultation with a sub-group of the Course Coordinators Group. To facilitate ownership of the research, the researcher met with the participant group prior to the research beginning, to discuss the format of the research, to discuss the types of questions that would be asked, and to ask for feedback on a draft of the research survey, which involved incorporating any amendments that the group had. The survey was then shared on the participant WhatsApp group, and assistance was on hand to anyone who might have needed it from a literacy perspective. Focus groups followed a similar structure to the course sessions and involved being split into breakout groups for private discussion before feeding back to the wider group and to the researcher.

⁴⁸ Helleiner, J. (2003). *Racism and the Politics of Culture: Irish Travellers*. University of Toronto Press: Canada.

⁴⁹ Ibid p.23

⁵⁰ Lawrence, K. (2017). *Traveller outcomes in education: A Traveller perspective*. Unpublished thesis: Maynooth University.

The focus group with course-coordinators took place in March, which was close to the start of the course, and discussed:

- The origins of the course.
- The importance of the course being Traveller specific, and Traveller led
- The issues around seeking accreditation.
- The hopes and expectations for the course, its participants, and the Traveller community.

A final focus group took place in early September after the course had finished, and discussed the following with the course-coordinators group:

- Their experience and observations of the course, the process, and its participants.
- What they would do differently given the opportunity.
- What the highlights were.
- Where next?

A smaller focus group also took place with academic staff in Maynooth University's Adult and Community Education Department, around the subject of accreditation for courses organised by community organisations such as the Traveller Counselling Service. This conversation discussed QQI accreditation, university accreditation, and is discussed in more detail in Part 4.

A HARD PILL

The community is not five days
It's seven days
phone calls 24 seven
it's a crisis
a hard pill

I'm going to sit with this person for a while
Come in
have a cup of tea
how do you feel?
and what's going on?

Sat down with the women
to try and decipher some of the letters
or some of the forms
'What does that mean?'

'We lost a young man'
Forget the paperwork
whatever it is
But now you have to cross your T's
and dot your 'I's
policies that affect you on the day to day

There's one person that really impressed me
I know she dropped out halfway
If I never see her again
I just hope to God that God will guide her
and give her the gift that she has

**Excerpted from focus group transcript with
participants on the Mincéir Mental Health Course, July 2021**

PART 3

THE FINDINGS

PART 3: THE FINDINGS

"I think it's fantastic that there's key speakers from the Traveller community. I think that's really, really important, because there is Travellers out there who are great practitioners, so that's a good contribution to the course".

- **Course Coordinators Group Participant**

The findings in this section are discussed under five main headings; **Reasons behind course participation, Experience of course participation, Self-evaluation of learning & Assessment and Recommendations & What could be done differently.** Each heading incorporates participant feedback as well as contribution from the stakeholders. With this structure we can put forward a robust evaluation of the project's success in terms of participation, as well as affording the opportunity to reflect on what we would do differently given the opportunity. It is hoped that this section will be significant both in terms of capturing the efficacy of the course, and by providing the outcomes of a pilot project that has the potential to be replicated or adapted.

3.1 Reasons behind Course Participation/Set-up – Participants & Coordinators

"Society sees this as an add-on, in some ways that like, we're never... the centre of things. Usually, it's an add-on... where we're always kept on the periphery, you know? Outside of the town."

- **Course Coordinators Group Participant**

For course coordinators, the idea for the Mincéirs Mental Health Course was inspired by a general 'mental health in the community' course, being run as a certificate programme in a university. There was an immediate barrier for Traveller participants because of the financial outlay required. Through exploring whether accommodations could be made for Traveller participants, a design for a Traveller-specific course emerged led by the Traveller Counselling Service.

“We wanted it to be something that would be of real benefit to the members of the Traveller community to the people who took the course” .

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

Participants on the Mincéirs Mental Health Course discussed their reasons for signing up to the course in the pre-course survey and focus group. The majority of people spoke about wanting to do the course to be able to help family, friends, and their community, with regard to mental health.

“The course offers the opportunity to get tools around how to be able to support and help the family members”.

- Course Participant

“For some of us it was personal like you know to try to like recognise and then see the signs of mental health”.

- Course Participant

The subject of advocacy was also referred to. There was a strong sense that there was a need for mental health advocates within the Traveller Community who would be in a position to speak up and out for people with mental health issues who might not be in a position to do so for themselves. While there are no official statistics on the number of Travellers in prison it is recognised that Travellers are significantly over-represented within the prison system, as - although Travellers only account for 0.6% of the overall population in the Republic of Ireland it is estimated that they account for 22% of the female prison population and 15% of the male prison population.⁵¹ Self-advocacy for Travellers in prison through peer-support has been identified as one of five key action areas by the Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI) in response to the extreme challenges and difficulties experienced by Travellers within Irish Prisons,⁵² and was highlighted in this research as motivation for signing up to the Mincéirs Mental Health Course.

⁵¹ Irish Prison Service (2016): Strategic Plan 2016-2018. Dublin: Dept of Justice and Equality.

⁵² Lalor March, T. (2017). Travellers in Prison Initiative Ethnic Identifiers in Irish Prisons-Context and recommended practice for improving data collection on Travellers and minority ethnic groups in Irish Prisons. SSGT: Dublin.

“Some of us work in the prison, so to advocate for the women in prison”.

- Course Participant

Other Travellers are either reticent or afraid to ask for help on their own behalf. This was summed up concisely by some participants on the course describing their reasons for wanting to take part;

“To support people and feed information to people on services that is available, because some Travellers have mental health issues and are afraid to ask”.

- Course Participant

“To advocate on behalf of family members or friends...suffering from mental health”.

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

Dr. Sindy Joyce has documented the obstacles to self-advocacy faced for the ‘ordinary young Traveller’, who lives with the anticipation of ‘hostility and discrimination and without the anticipation of access to justice’.⁵³ Given the high rate of suicide in the community, six times higher than non-Travellers, and with 65% of these victims under the age of 30,⁵⁴ the need for community mental health advocates is urgent. There continues to be stigma in relation to mental health among the Traveller community, and many Travellers are either not familiar with, or do not access, existing mental health services.⁵⁵

⁵³ Joyce, S. (2018). Mincéirs Siúladh: An ethnographic study of young Travellers experiences of racism in an Irish city. University of Limerick. P.154.

⁵⁴ HSE. (2020). Traveller Mental Health Initiatives – Evaluation Report July 2020. Available at: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/primarycare/socialinclusion/about-social-inclusion/news/s3-hse-mhi-evaluation-final-051120.pdf>

⁵⁵ Pavee Point and The Health Unit (Eastern Region). (2015). Young Pavees: Their Mental Health Needs: A Research Report. Pavee Point Publication.

The subject of 'fear' and 'safety' arose several times in focus group discussions, as some participants explained that a big draw to doing the course had been down to its being Traveller specific. For some participants, this meant being able to ask questions in what was considered to be a 'safe' and 'supportive' space.

"We feel safer because it's Traveller specific and that it's a Traveller course. Because we've all been in different courses, and we've all been like, you know, the only Traveller".

- Course Participant

"They weren't nervous about saying something, and or saying it in a wrong way, because we're quite aware that not everybody in the Traveller community is not at the same level".

- Course Participant

Equally, from the course-coordinators, there was an innate understanding of Traveller experience in education, and the need to provide something where participants could feel 'safe', 'valued' and 'central' to all aspects of the course.

"Participants are coming into something that they enjoy and into a safe space where they are guaranteed the dignity and respect. And that's not always the case in a learning situation for somebody. That is, sometimes it's not.. a safe space".

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

In a research study into the knowledge and experiences of Traveller women in the area of health literacy, some participants cited 'embarrassment' as a barrier to participation in education, primarily as a fear response to complicated language and the 'jargon' typically used within certain sectors.⁵⁶ On the Mincéirs Mental Health Course, participants also referred to language and confusion about certain words, as a source of embarrassment in traditional educational settings that would be made up of a majority of 'settled' people.

"A safe space, to just say...feel safe to say...'I don't know what that word means'. 'What does that mean, 'theory'?' or 'What does that mean?'".

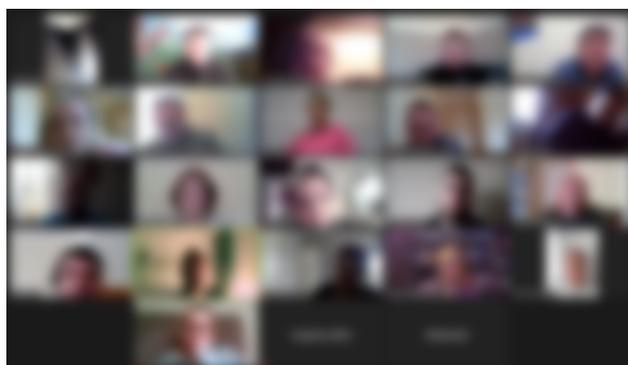
- Course Participant

"We need to, you know, embrace the language as well...we have to learn the jargon, to be part of the system. Because if you don't know the jargon, you know what I mean? So, it's a good Traveller, safe place to say, "derogatory'... sorry, I don't know what that means"".

- Course Participant

"I've done college myself, where you walk in and people they're like, of all different grades. You feel like you don't want to speak in case you're getting the wrong words out".

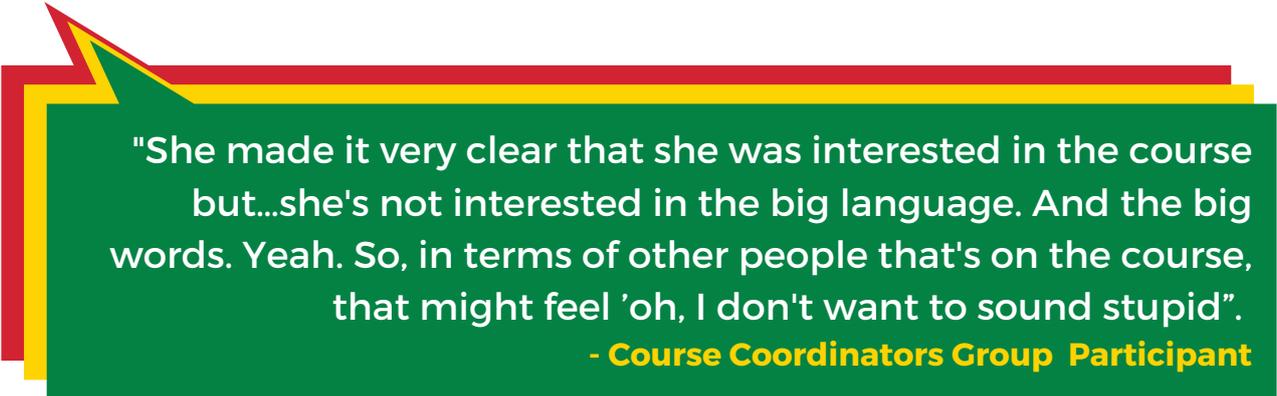
- Course Participant



⁵⁶ Fitzmaurice, V. (2012). Health Literacy: Knowledge and experiences of Traveller women. Masters thesis, National University of Ireland Maynooth.

Other historically oral Indigenous cultures, such as the First Nations in Canada, were thrown violently into the grasp of literacy approximately 100 years ago and forced to accept literacy and everything that went with it, to become both literate participants in society, and 'westernised', in terms of behaviours and thinking.⁵⁷ Coming to literacy based schooling, from a home-life and culture still linked in value systems and thought patterns of an oral society, Indigenous youth struggle in the school-system where they show 'over-inclusion' in various special needs categories and have literacy scores below averages.⁵⁸ Due to the traditional oral culture of the Traveller community as well as the systemic racism that has excluded Travellers from educational institutions,⁵⁹ Travellers are significantly disadvantaged in terms of education, and consequently their educational status is considerably lower than that of their settled peers.⁶⁰

Language and 'jargon' came up in the course-coordinators' focus group multiple times, as the topic of how academic language and the implications of not understanding 'settled' or majority terminology can be experienced by the Traveller community as a barrier to participation.



"She made it very clear that she was interested in the course but...she's not interested in the big language. And the big words. Yeah. So, in terms of other people that's on the course, that might feel 'oh, I don't want to sound stupid'".

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

The course content for the Mincéirs Mental Health Course, included sessions that specifically related to 'jargon' and sector-specific language and terminology to address this barrier head-on.

⁵⁷

Faber, C. (2009). The Impact of Literacy on First Nations Oral Cultures. Available at:

<https://blogs.ubc.ca/etec540sept09/2009/10/04/the-impact-of-literacy-on-first-nations-oral-cultures/>

⁵⁸ Fettes, M. (2005). Imaginative Engagement in Culturally Diverse Classrooms Changing Teacher Thinking and Practice within a Community-University Research Alliance. Simon Fraser University: Canada.

⁵⁹ Walsh, C. (2007). Irish Travellers on Writing, Orality, Representation and Belonging. Concordia University: Canada.

⁶⁰ Pavee Point. Travellers and Education. Available at: http://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Education_Leaflet.pdf

3.2 Experience of Course Participation – Participants & Coordinators

Course participants were unanimously positive about their experience of participation on the Mincéirs Mental Health Course. The course content and the speakers were underscored as one of the high points of the course.

“Looking at mental health and good practices from the Aboriginal community. So, we may take and learn from that as well”.

- Course Participant

"I was struck by as I've read a lot...but to actually hear some of the people from Canada, and from Australia, talk and about their experiences, how they're treated, how they're marginalised. And the similarities, you know? There was differences as well, but the similarities, I felt were more there”.

- Course Participant

The International contribution was also highlighted by the course coordinators group as a special feature of the course, as people spoke about the sense of connection that was formed between them as Indigenous minorities.

“I think the input from our International speakers really made a difference because it was that piece of connectivity and kind of going, ‘oh, we do that too. Oh, that's the same in our society’. And I think it always makes us feel better about ourselves when we realise we're not the only ones”.

-Course Coordinators Group Participant

“The International input for me, was kind of a, you know, a standout bit as well. In terms of that connection with other excluded groups. Even besides the input, the connection was, you know...something! I thought ‘God... we've really created some kind of connection in this in this process’, you know?”

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

Course participants also discussed the experience of the course having taken place online. Some said that the benefits included meeting and learning with Travellers from a wide-geographical spread, whom they may not have met before, while others highlighted the disadvantages with regard to discussing emotive topics and not being in a position to be able to connect with each other over a cup of tea or to physically reach out to someone.

“Very often, a lot of courses are in Dublin. And with our group there was Donegal, there was Cavan and that would not be possible. I think that was a great advantage”.

-Course Coordinators Group Participant

“You're losing connection with people, like physical connection, you know, like sitting around the table...and asking people how they feel or...to engage in a deeper conversation with people. The physical presence is missing. Not been able to offer support over a computer”

- Course Participant

“Some very personal stories, very, would love just to have been able to make that personal eye contact with the person or even reach out to them”.

-Course Participant

For the course organisers, while initially the unprecedented move online was a bit unsettling, the benefits of the course running online quickly became apparent.

“Once we decided to go online Zoom, you know, there was a risk in that, would people be able to link in? How do we make sure?”

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

“So going on Zoom, I think the Zoom was really, really good, actually, I think, you know, in terms of, you know, people could come on the course, but didn't have to travel”.

-Course Coordinators Group Participant

There was broad recognition however, that the success of the online move in terms of participant retention and experience was not accidental and was down to the amount of forethought and planning that went into facilitating participants' and indeed facilitators' online experience.

“To have X there in the background was a real plus. It kind of gave more confidence, having somebody that can support around that (online), because, you know, if things start to go awry.”

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

Local Traveller organisations were engaged with to ensure that participants had access to a device and connection; dedicated online support ensured that the weekly sessions were free of technical issues and interference and meant that facilitators could concentrate on the session and the participants rather than on resolving the practical difficulties that often arise in online classes; administration kept in regular contact with participants privately and through a WhatsApp group, to keep the group linked in and connected throughout.

“In fairness to local organisations, supporting people to link in, and for people who had more challenges than others, you know, to have conversations with and, you know, meet with the people afterwards, even for an hour”.

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

3.3 Participant Survey & Self-Evaluation of Learning

Participants on the Mincéirs Mental Health Course took part in a pre-and post-course survey, to self-evaluate their confidence in relation to mental health topics that would be covered on the course, and that were related to the overall objective of the course in terms of community advocacy. The design of the survey was done in collaboration with the sub-group of the course-coordinators group supporting this research, and participants were also invited to feed into the draft survey in a session at the start of the course. The survey was not distributed until participants had the opportunity to review and consider the questions. The survey took approximately 3-5 minutes to complete.

3.3.1 Participant Profile

Twelve Females and Eight males took part in the research evaluation. The majority of participants (9) were in the 25-39 age bracket. Eight were between the ages of 40 and 54. There were two participants aged over 55 at the time of participation, and just one was under 25.

Eleven participants had previous training in areas concerned with Mental Health, for example, addiction, suicide prevention, or bereavement training. 4 participants had a Diploma in areas such as community and drug work, alcohol and drugs addiction. QQI Level 6 was also referred to, in subjects such as counselling and social care, while the majority of participants referred to having trained on more specialised courses focused on specific areas in mental health such as; WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan); ASSIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training); Rainbows Bereavement Training; Urrús (the Irish word for strength/confidence) training in relation to drug and alcohol misuse; safe TALK (suicide alertness training). HSE (Health Service Executive) mental health training was also mentioned by some participants as having been received.

Participants were asked whether the fact that the Mincéirs Mental Health Course was taking place online was a barrier. Seventeen participants said it was not a barrier, with some saying that they found the online aspect preferable as *'it gave me time to do personal tasks'*. Of the three participants who experienced the online aspect as a barrier, not being 'familiar' with the technology, or 'not very technical' were the reasons cited for this, as well as a preference for meeting people face-to-face; *'I'd rather meet and engage properly with people'*.

3.3.2 Self-Evaluation of Learning

Participants were asked to self-evaluate on a Likert scale their confidence and understanding in relation to Traveller mental health, as well as their confidence in engaging with mental health supports on behalf of their community and acting as advocates. Specifically, participants were asked to consider the following statements.

1. *"I feel confident in dealing with mental health services."*
2. *"I feel that I can advise my community about going to mental health services."*
3. *"I feel I understand the mental health issues faced by my community."*
4. *"I understand what causes mental health issues for my community."*
5. *"I can relate to the mental health issues faced by other minority communities."*
6. *"I feel confident in picking up the early signs of mental health issues."*
7. *"I feel I have a good understanding of what needs to be done to improve Traveller mental health."*
8. *"I feel confident recognising the barriers to access to mental health services for Travellers."*

The numbers of people who participated in the pre-course and post-course survey differ considerably, as 20 participants took part in the pre-course survey, which was 100% of the course participants at the time, while six or 40% were available to answer the post-course survey. While that is an ample sample of respondents to be able to put forward an evaluation, as it is only where the results obtained where the response rate is below 30% that the results should be treated with care⁶¹, it is nevertheless challenging to put forward a standard comparison for each of the questions. So, the survey instead is analysed in its entirety and any subtle or significant differences that the researcher believes to be relevant are presented here.

⁶¹ Keane, E. & Mac Labhrainn, I. (2005). Obtaining Student Feedback on Teaching & Course Quality. Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. NUI Galway: Galway.

Pre-course for all of these questions, between 15% and 20% of participants disagreed with these statements to varying degrees, while the majority (80% - 85%) agreed with these statements to varying degrees. It is worth highlighting however, that no one strongly agreed with statement seven, i.e. 'I feel I have a good understanding of what needs to be done to improve Traveller mental health'. Participants were also asked to consider how important it was to them that the course was specific to Traveller mental health, and that it was Traveller led. 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed in the importance of the course being Traveller specific and Traveller led, while for the remainder (or two participants), these were not significant reasons behind their signing up to take part on the course.

In the post-course evaluation, all participants (100%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the eight statements above, indicating a marked increase in confidence levels. However, it is possible that those who chose to take part in the post-course survey were those who felt most engaged with the course, and therefore most confident.

3.3.3 Post-course Survey Comments

There are a couple of reasons why engagement with the post-course survey may not have been as high as with the pre-course survey, but the most likely one is down to the time lapse. This study had an exceptionally high participation rate in the research at the start of the course (100%), but the post-course evaluation was issued after the course had finished and perhaps as a consequence the response rate was lower (40%). It is also important to note that a lower participation rate in the post-course survey by no means diminishes the value or quality of participant input.

The post-course survey included open-ended questions pertaining to the course that were not included in the pre-course version. The inclusion of open-ended questions might have deterred some participants from responding, as this version took slightly longer to complete (5-7 minutes). These were questions that emerged from conversations in the participant focus groups and were concerned with capturing what participants felt they gained from the course, as well as providing an opportunity for participants to consider 'where next?'.

In terms of what participants felt they gained from the course, all participants referred to increased knowledge, awareness and understanding.

“I have gained a lot of knowledge and awareness regarding mental health and more confidence in making referrals to agencies”.

- Survey Participant

“From this course, I gained a better understanding of mental health and seeing early signs that people could or might have mental health problems.”

- Survey Participant

There was a sense in some of the meetings that there were aspects to the course content that were so complex and critical to the subject of Traveller mental health, that there simply was not enough time to explore these topics in sufficient detail. Consequently, the subject of specialisation arose, and participants were asked in the post-course survey if there were subject areas that were of particular interest and that they would like the opportunity to explore in more depth. Traveller appropriacy and cultural awareness was highlighted.

“I would like to focus on challenging policy and agencies that are not Traveller appropriate”

- Survey Participant

Irish Mental Health Policy; sexuality and mental health; suicide prevention; mental health needs of indigenous populations; were some of the other areas underscored as of areas of interest to participants.

3.4 Recommendations & What could be done differently?

“We all know we’ve the experience, and you have the knowledge of what’s happening on the ground, but you won’t get past the door, you won’t go into any employment unless you have some kind of official training”.
- Course Participant

Time, specialisation, and accreditation were the main themes that arose both with participants and with the course coordinators group in relation to ‘what could be done differently?’. In terms of timing, which did not come up in either of the pre-course discussion groups, yet post-course participants and coordinators alike spoke of how a two-hour session was simply not long enough to cover the content and to facilitate critical follow-on discussion and engagement.

“I always felt that we didn't have enough time, I mean, two hours is a fairly large space of time, but at the same time, there was times when I would have loved to have had maybe the extra hour to tease out something else, or to learn a bit more about it.”
- Course Participant

““I would have liked to see it a half day, I think two hours is not long enough”.
- Course Participant

“We just didn't have time for, like, you know, there wasn't time. So, I mean, you really could have had a day for each topic, like no question, there just wasn't enough time in two hours or three hours, just to, to actually allow things to develop”.

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the understanding that there had not been enough time to give certain topics the attention they warranted, both groups also spoke about wanting to explore certain areas in more detail. The subject of module specialisation was discussed and referred to with both groups of participants.

“For instance, around the suicide, the whole issue of suicide, and, you know, the skills, we couldn't go into that...in more depth. ‘Personal care’, for instance, that Sandra McDonagh did... ..‘cultural competency training’. We touched on it and kind of couldn't go into it in more depth”

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

The subject of accreditation will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, but this matter was raised in all focus groups with both participants and course coordinators. As emphasised earlier in the report, considerable time and effort went into trying to obtain accreditation for the course, and for some participants and indeed some of the organisers, there was a palpable sense of disappointment that this barrier had not been surmounted.

“The accreditation thing is, it's like a something I didn't get, you know, something we didn't achieve, you know, and that stands as a disappointment for me, you know?”

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

“There's a lot of people that are capable that on the course, that have worked for years, that have been advocates, or could be let to go on and do clinical work, counselling, or other stuff. But unless we have official training, it isn't much good.”

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

From the course coordinators group, there was a sense of determination around solving the accreditation dilemma for the Mincéirs Mental Health Course in future iterations, but in doing so, also working to resolve the issue for this year's course participants.

“With the amount of work that's gone into, you know, the structure of it, the handbook...every single aspect of what a course needs to be accredited is ticked, there's no question about it”.

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

And while there was undoubtedly a perception of disappointment, this was balanced by the reality of the achievement of the course, which realised 16 Travellers successfully completing the 21 weeks online during Covid-19 lockdowns.

“We finished what at least a core of 15 or 16 people, whether it was accredited or not. And you're talking about a group of people that every week, there were some crisis, I mean across the country! And people still came. Everyone persevered and seen the course out. And it's not that they just persevered. They enjoyed!”

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

CAMPFIRE IN THE DARK

(Original words by Paddy Houlihan)

My father rises early and he makes a sup of tea
He lights the kitchen stove and then he calls me
His days are often empty, he's nothing much to do
So he sits and tells me stories of the travelling life he knew

In the evening they would meet in lonely country lanes
A field away you'd hear a collie bark
And they'd pass the time away with talks about the day
Standing 'round the campfire in the dark
Standing 'round the campfire in the dark

My mother likes the house, the hot water and the rooms
It's warm in the winter and she's handy with the broom
Sometimes she makes Colcannon, more often Griddle Bread
There's a hunger deep inside her for a travelling life that's dead.

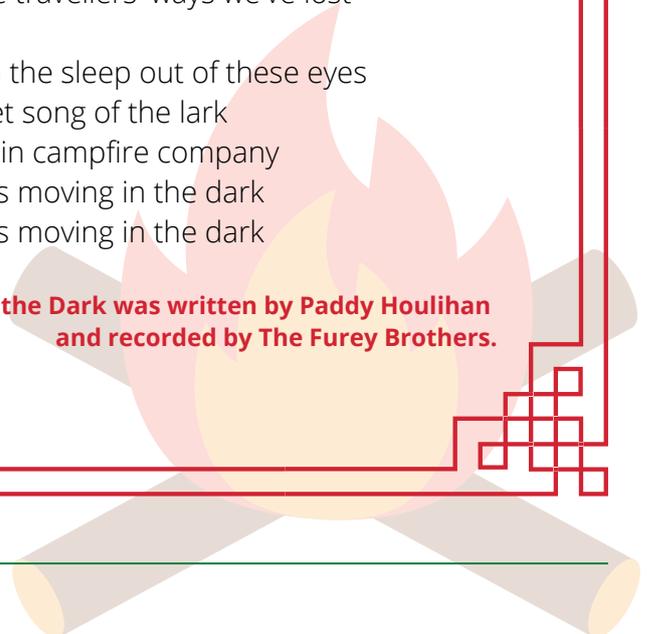
In the evening she would lift the black pots from the coals
A bit to eat she always would remark
There'd be vessels left to clean while children could be seen
Playing 'round the campfire in the dark
Playing 'round the campfire in the dark

'We'd go down to the pool hall to chat up the town bears
Sometimes at their discos we can't get past the doors
We're still tinkers to them and it's thrown at our ears
We're still the awful strangers after all these years

And I think about my own life and the way that it will be
An Escort van, a bit of dealing, a wife and family
Thursday I collect the Dole, Friday pitch and toss
But on the site I think about the travellers' ways we've lost

And I wish that I could rise, wash the sleep out of these eyes
And listen to the sweet song of the lark
And I wish that I could be in campfire company
With the sound of horses moving in the dark
With the sound of horses moving in the dark

**Campfire in the Dark was written by Paddy Houlihan
and recorded by The Furey Brothers.**



PART 4

ACCREDITATION & ASSESSMENT

PART 4: ACCREDITATION & ASSESSMENT

"When you're the lived experience, you're bringing it from the inside as well. I was at a Black activist talk once, and he said, 'look, I haven't done 200 academic courses, but you don't learn the experience from the books. No matter whether you went to university or didn't go to university...you have the experience, you're the expert in your own experience'. And I think, people need to value that experience. Without having that experience, how can you possibly determine what the course content is?"

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

Accreditation is the word used to describe the systems of quality assessment that approve an educational programme or institution, or both.⁶² The Mincéirs Mental Health Course is officially endorsed by both the Traveller Counselling Service and The National Traveller Mental Health Network, following an unsuccessful attempt to have the course accredited by either a Higher Education Institution or by QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) formerly FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council).

In a similar approach to assessment as awards at QQI level 5 or QQI level 6, participants on the Mincéirs Mental Health Course undertook three different assessments;

1. **Learner Record** - The learner's self-reported and self-reflective record in which they describe specific learning experiences, activities, responses, and skills acquired after each session.
2. **Project** - The project brief on the Mincéirs Mental Health Course was to design and present a poster that could be used in a Traveller organisation, for example to raise awareness about Traveller mental health supports.
3. **Assignment** - An assignment (approx. 2000 words or equivalent) in report format on a topic such as their understanding of the content on a session that they had been present at and to discuss its relevance to them or their work.

⁶² Fitzsimons, C. (2017). Community Education and Neoliberalism. Philosophies, Practices and Policies in Ireland. Palgrave MacMillan.

Facilitators on the course were creative and flexible in content delivery, and equally the space was allowed for participants to be so in their assignments. In assessment 3, participants had the option to voice record their submission. In the project in assessment 2, due to the online element of the course and the Covid 19 restrictions, participants could choose whether to complete this assessment individually or as part of a group and were encouraged to create or adapt something that would be of most benefit to their Traveller organisation, if they were working in one. Referencing was expected, and participants were shown how to use referencing tools and additional support was available to anyone who required help with assessment. In terms of marking, both Hazel and Thomas, who have years of marking experience at university level, worked as co-assessors and used a rubric to assist with the allocation of grades, and Emma Gilchreest (Community Training Officer LOETB) compiled the final marks depending on the weighting of the different assessments. While there is not an external accrediting body, participants attended a graduation ceremony in Wynn's Hotel on the 22nd of September 2021 and received a certificate with their final grade.

However, for some participants, the fact that the course was not externally accredited was a source of disappointment, and frustration was expressed with regard to doing 'internal' training that does not carry the same weight within the wider community in terms of employment opportunities.

“That's what happens a lot in our community. We interact with courses, but they're non-accredited so we do 9 months to a year, but all I listen to now is when we as members of the Traveller community go for a job, 'where is your accreditation?' 'where is your degrees?'. So, I would like to see accreditation...because I mean the participation is great, the interaction is great, but you're a bit more valued than just participating”.

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

To try to understand both sides of the barrier in relation to external accreditation, this evaluation incorporated a focus group with two senior staff members in the Adult and Community Education Department in Maynooth University, both of whom have a longstanding interest in educational access and equality, as well as extensive knowledge and experience in the field of accreditation both at university level and at QQI. The conversation took place online and was an unstructured discussion to try to understand with hindsight, why the bid for externally accrediting the Mincéirs Mental Health Course had been unsuccessful. This chapter will therefore discuss the subject of accreditation, supported by the input from the academic participants, and aim to tease out some of the reasons why the considerable effort put in to obtaining external accreditation for the Mincéirs Mental Health Course had not yielded fruit.

The Government action plan for increasing Traveller participation at Higher Education 2019-2021, recognised that ‘a diversity of approaches’ would be required to support the vision,⁶³ however, Cathleen McDonagh Clark, in her address to the Oireachtas stated, that if the system of education is continued to be built around what makes sense at Government level ‘on Marlborough Street and Merrion Street’, then we will not succeed in creating accessible educational opportunities for Travellers.⁶⁴ Obtaining QQI accreditation, particularly for a service such as The Traveller Counselling Service whose primary remit is not education provision, can be a lengthy and labour-intensive process that has become less supportive of community education providers since the establishment of QQI in 2012.⁶⁵

“I had a very long conversation with a lovely lady in the FETAC board. And she told me... she was very honest, and she said, ‘look, it's a full-time job for one person to get accreditation”.
- Course Coordinators Group Participant

⁶³ Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2019) Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in

Higher Education 2019–2021. <https://assets.gov.ie/41923/f4cd00e21a4346bc97671a72ab41f12f.pdf>.

Cathleen McDonagh Clarke (2019). Address to the Oireachtas available at:

https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_key_issues_affecting_the_traveller_community/2019-12-03/3/

⁶⁵ Fitzsimons, C. (2017). Community Education and Neoliberalism. Philosophies, Practices and Policies in Ireland. Palgrave MacMillan.

In 2012, a new direction for Ireland's public accreditation body was marked when the Quality Assurance and Qualifications Act was brought into law, establishing QQI through a merger of HETAC (Higher Education and Training Awards Council) and FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council). Previously supportive of Community Education, QQI overtly took on an authoritarian, directional and monitoring role, where the substance of an educational endeavour can get lost in the sea of form-filling and bureaucracy, and the original purpose of quality assurance gets drowned out.⁶⁶ Course providers or applicants who wish to apply for course validation, must first have established procedures in place for learners, such as those for 'access, transfer and progression', as well as extensive documentation requirements such as a '5-year plan of the programme' and an 'evaluation of the relevant programme against the applicable validation policies and criteria'.⁶⁷ QQI will then 'aim' to determine whether an application meets criteria for validation within 25 weeks (6 months) of receiving a complete application 'assuming no supplementary documentary information is required'.⁶⁸

QQI argue that their validation policies and criteria are designed to 'avoid inadvertent bias' and believes this facilitates 'diversity' and 'innovation' (p. 5). However, QQI policies, criteria, and structure, for validation of programmes of education and training, appear to be inconducive to supporting a grass-roots and community driven approach to education, such as the one put forward here. As such, as the statutory body for accreditation, might it actually be incurring the very bias it purports to be avoiding? However, the academic participants on this research evaluation asserted that there are many misconceptions about QQI, that in actuality are a misinterpretation of QQI criteria.

"There is this whole series of myths that have built up around QQI. People say, 'QQI say this'. And then you actually say, 'ok where do QQI say that?' I say that they actually don't. My experience is that they (QQI) are a pretty supportive organisation".

-Academic Participant

⁶⁶ Fitzsimons, C. (2017). Community Education and Neoliberalism. Philosophies, Practices and Policies in

⁶⁷ Ireland. Palgrave MacMillan.

QQI. (2017). Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Initial_Validation_policy_7_10_13.pdf

⁶⁸ Ibid p. 18

Although QQI modules such as Mental Health Awareness QQI Level 6 have a module descriptor detailing a large number of objectives, specific content, and learning outcomes, these are in fact open to be changed.

“Since about two years ago, QQI now allow you to rewrite the learning outcomes...so, you can send in the 20 learning outcomes and say, ‘we’ve condensed these into five, can you approve that? The very first line in a huge programme of contents will say, ‘these are indicative contents’”.

-Academic Participant

However, as highlighted above, the ‘myths’ around QQI and its criteria might pose a barrier that is difficult to navigate particularly as an external organisation. In fact, the Traveller Counselling Service first explored the notion of running the Mincéirs Mental Health Course in conjunction with a Higher Education Institution, who were operating a course at QQI Level 6 in Community Mental Health. There were some prohibitive factors for the Traveller community such as the course cost, and the fact that it was being run for ‘individuals’ rather than a community. After almost a year of false starts, it was decided that it might be better to structure and organise the course specific to the Traveller community.

The conversation with our academic colleagues on this evaluation was insightful, as they were able to share their experience of partnering with a community organisation to create a course, but which never evolved beyond the development stages. This example provides us with insight as to what the experience of collaboration can be from the accrediting organisation.

“We were in partnership with an organisation. We developed a course with them... we spent a year and a half developing that course, putting it through the various hoops, and then they disappeared. They didn't follow through with it. So, you know, that's what it's like from the other end.”

- Academic Participant

Similarly to QQI, the amount of 'hoops' that now have to be circumnavigated at university level in order to build an education programme from zero, were discussed and put forward as suggestions as to why there may have been reticence to partnering on the Mincéirs Mental Health Course.

“20 years ago...we would have done that. We ran a course for example, with the X community many years ago. There was an appropriate pedagogy, the systems at that time allowed us to do that. But the systems now are such that, honest to God, it would just take so long, so much. There's so many neoliberal frameworks that would have to be negotiated. That it would, it would take what's good in the program, and squeeze that out.”
- Academic Participant

The barriers and complexities in relation to accreditation has brought rise once more to earlier calls for community educators to develop their own system of accreditation, and themselves be the accrediting bodies.⁶⁹ However, although this might seem like an obvious and attractive option, it could lack the social and economic capital which was the key driving force in the demand for community education accreditation in the first place.⁷⁰ Furthermore, it can be extremely time-consuming.

One way of accrediting a course such as the Mincéirs Mental Health Course, would be to fit it into an existing QQI course.

“She suggested that a better way for us would be to go through an existing college... and because we'll be associated and affiliated with them, it would... be much easier to apply for and receive accreditation”.

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

⁶⁹ Fitzsimons, C. (2017). Community Education and Neoliberalism. Philosophies, Practices and Policies in Ireland. Palgrave MacMillan.

⁷⁰ Finnegan, F. & Cervinkova, H. (2021). Connecting Communities and Higher Education - Learning from the Community Connect Strand of the College Connect Project. Maynooth University: Ireland.

Similarly, our academic colleagues believe that a partnership approach to accreditation that is formed at the developmental stages, with an organisation that shares similar values and ways of working, would be the most likely route to lead to a successful outcome.

“So, the best way to go is the way is that a partnership is formed from the start. And course provision and process is developed. You partner with somebody who has a philosophical and disciplinary sympathy and experience, you know, an ideological resonance congruence with this kind of a project.”

- Academic Participant

However, power dynamics need to be considered in approaching a partnership, particularly with an organisation or institution such as a higher education institution, that carries considerable weight. The mainstreaming of access and the development of funding streams in support of widening participation means that there is a competition in terms of universities being perceived as ‘access leaders’ in higher education⁷¹, and Travellers are very much to the fore of this agenda.

“The managerial framework in the university and the accounting situation is getting more and more difficult to negotiate”..

- Course Coordinators Group Participant

Furthermore, the process of change that arises from situating community organisations in the centre of a university agenda, and placing community needs before institutional priorities, challenges the hierarchy of accepted institutional knowledge, and generates friction⁷². While navigating these frictions might ultimately prove to be worthwhile, they are laborious,⁷³ and might serve to remove some of the enjoyment from the creative process of developing a course like the Mincéirs Mental Health Course, which as highlighted in the prologue to this report in the interview with Thomas McCann, was central to this project and permeated all aspects for both organisers and participants alike.

⁷¹ Fleming T., Loxley A, & Finnegan F. (2017) Access and participation in Irish Higher Education. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁷² Finnegan, F. & Cervinkova, H. (2021). Connecting Communities and Higher Education - Learning from the

⁷³ Community Connect Strand of the College Connect Project. Maynooth University: Ireland.

Ibid

WE'RE THE EXPERTS

We know what mental health there is
We're the experts
We can see it day in day out
people that have that have died to suicide
suffering
it's your fear in your body
of who's next

Some very personal stories
would love just to have been able to make that personal eye contact
or even reach out to them
We knew where each person was coming from
weren't nervous about saying something
or saying it in a wrong way

I would have learned a lot
from people that were participating,
regardless of where they came from
or what their experience was
I've read a lot, and I've no wonder there,
but to actually hear some of the people from Canada
and from Australia,
how they're treated
how they're marginalized

I enjoyed the course with lentils on it
I don't think it was long enough
And then there was weeks
...then you just want to finish

**Adapted from focus group transcript with participants on the Mincéir
Mental Health Course, July 2021**

PART 5

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND
WHERE NEXT?

PART 5: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND WHERE NEXT?

“It sounds as if this programme seems to have an integrity of its own, it has a purpose of its own, an identity of its own, and that it deserves accreditation of its own, without being fitted into somebody else's parameters”.

- Academic Participant

There is growing consensus and awareness of the need for Indigenous-led education that centres a culturally relevant curriculum, culturally safe learning environments, culturally competent teachers, and generally uplifts Indigenous knowledge and culture as valuable.⁷⁴ Traveller autobiographies such as Nan Joyce's *My Life on the Road*, is a 'spoken' work that challenges the dominant discourse that dismisses oral cultures as naïve or inadequate.⁷⁵ Countries such as Canada have taken this a step further and formally recognised the need for and importance of Indigenous control of Indigenous education, centred on a culturally appropriate curriculum and culturally protected learning environments.⁷⁶

Through drawing comparisons with programmes in place in other Indigenous cultures, we can begin to imagine the scope for future projects that build on the success of Traveller led initiatives like the Mincéirs Mental Health Course. Professor Honoré France from the University of Victoria (UVic) in British Columbia, Canada, who facilitated a session on the Mincéirs Mental Health Course, is one of 25 Indigenous faculty members in the university that employs approximately 90 Indigenous people.⁷⁷ To put this in context, UVic has a student population the size of University College Cork.^{78 79}

⁷⁴ Ugwuegbula, L. (2020). *Reclaiming Education: Indigenous Control of Indigenous Education: The Power of Traditional Education*. Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness In Partnership with the Misipawistik Cree Nation.

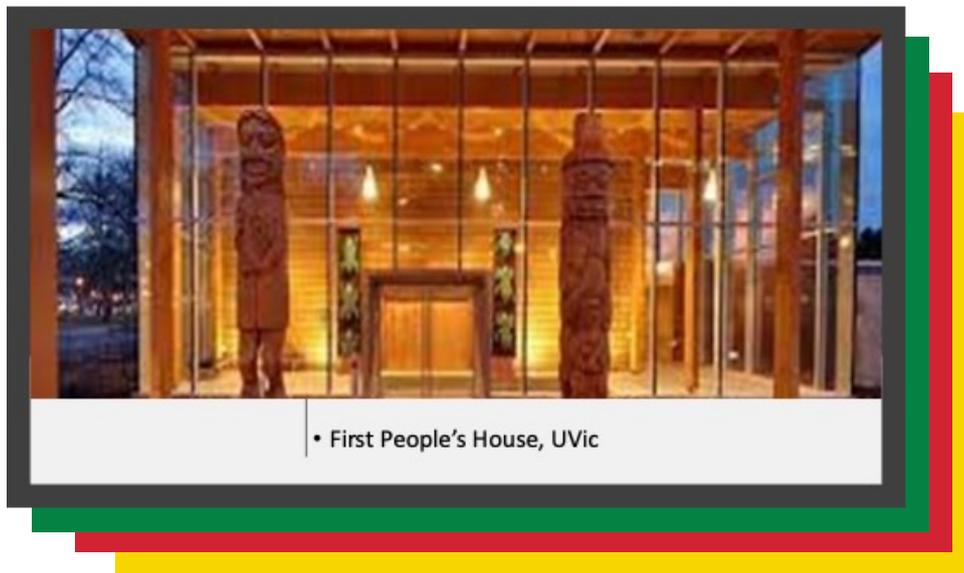
⁷⁵ Walsh, C. (2007). *Irish Travellers on Writing, Orality, Representation and Belonging*. Concordia University: Canada.

⁷⁶ Ugwuegbula, L. (2020). *Reclaiming Education: Indigenous Control of Indigenous Education. The Power of Traditional Education*. Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness In Partnership with the Misipawistik Cree Nation. Available at: <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PDF-Reclaiming-Education-Indigenous-Control-of-Indigenous-Education-v2.pdf>

⁷⁷ University of Victoria. *Indigenous Plan 2017-2022*.

⁷⁸ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-victoria>

⁷⁹ <https://hea.ie/higher-education-institutions/university-college-cork/>



The Centres on campus such as First People's House the social, cultural, and academic centre for Indigenous students at UVic (pictured in the previous page), are a feature of approximately 43% of Canadian post-secondary institutions, who have a specialised department or centre for Aboriginal students.⁸⁰

Australia is another source of inspiration, as they set an employment target of 3% Indigenous employment in the public sector, with annual reporting on this required.⁸¹

Traveller organisations have been calling for the Irish public sector to lead by example by employing members of Traveller community and setting targets for the employment of Travellers across all sectors.⁸² Anne Costello has asked that the public sector be representative of the population through the recruitment of Travellers and internships across all government departments and public bodies,⁸³ while Martin Ward has highlighted the overanalyses of the Traveller community through endless reports, that only serve to delay action for another 'three to five years'.⁸⁴

There have been many recent causes for celebration in relation to Traveller prominence and visibility; Senator Eileen Flynn making history as the first woman from the Traveller community to sit in the Seanad; Owen Ward's appointment as the first Traveller elected to NUI Galway Údarás na hOllscoile (Governing body of the university); and Dr. Sindy Joyce, the first Traveller to graduate with a PhD in Ireland. However, these successes should not be a 'news story' or an 'exception' but rather the norm.

⁸⁰ www.Canadian-universities.net/Campus/Aboriginal-Services.html

⁸¹ Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy, Australian Government, 2015.

⁸² Fagan, M. Public sector told to lead by example in employing members of Traveller community. Irish Examiner, 18th May 2021.

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

The Yellow Flag Programme, an intercultural education model developed by the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) in 2008, is regularly cited as being a game changer in terms of tackling racism and supporting intercultural diversity in Irish schools. However, despite this and other successful initiatives, Government policy seems to operate on the assumption that ‘settled people know what is best for Travellers’.⁸⁵

The first image at the front of this report is of Nancy Power, Thomas McCann and Margaret McDonagh presenting President Higgins with a hazel tree, a symbol of Travellers' strength, history, and resilience, to mark the first National Traveller Mental Health Day in 2020.⁸⁶ The policies pertaining to tree planting in the grounds of the Áras however, meant the same tree has had to find an alternative home, and the ‘tree of hope’ was blessed and planted in Knock exactly a year later in 2021.



The Mincéirs Mental Health Course of 2021 was also unable to find a home with an accrediting body, but the determination on the part of the course coordinators group to circumnavigate these barriers may ultimately lead to an alternative and more suitable solution. Throughout this evaluation, Travellers communicated a sense of being ‘added on’ or ‘fitted in’. This perception is reflected in Government policy, which allocates no sustainable or ring-fenced funding to respond to Traveller mental health, and with the exception of nine HSE Mental Health Service Coordinators for Travellers (none of whom are members of the Traveller community) relies on Dormant Accounts Funding.⁸⁷ Dormant funds or unclaimed life assurance policies, which have not been reclaimed by the original accounts/policy holder or their beneficiaries, are transferred each year by the holding institution to the Dormant Accounts Fund, and used to ‘support the development of persons who are economically or educationally disadvantaged, or affected by a disability’.⁸⁶ The absence of a dedicated budget and the reliance on Dormant Accounts Funding, that should be additional to and not a substitute for mainstream Government spending, compounds the sense of Traveller mental health issues being peripheral.

⁸⁵ Irish Traveller Movement

⁸⁶ <https://president.ie/en/diary/details/president-receives-representatives-of-national-traveller-mental-health-network>

⁸⁷ McDonnell, G. (2021). Address to the Oireachtas Sub-Committee - Urgent action on Traveller Health Plan needed as COVID-19 adds to Traveller mental health crisis.

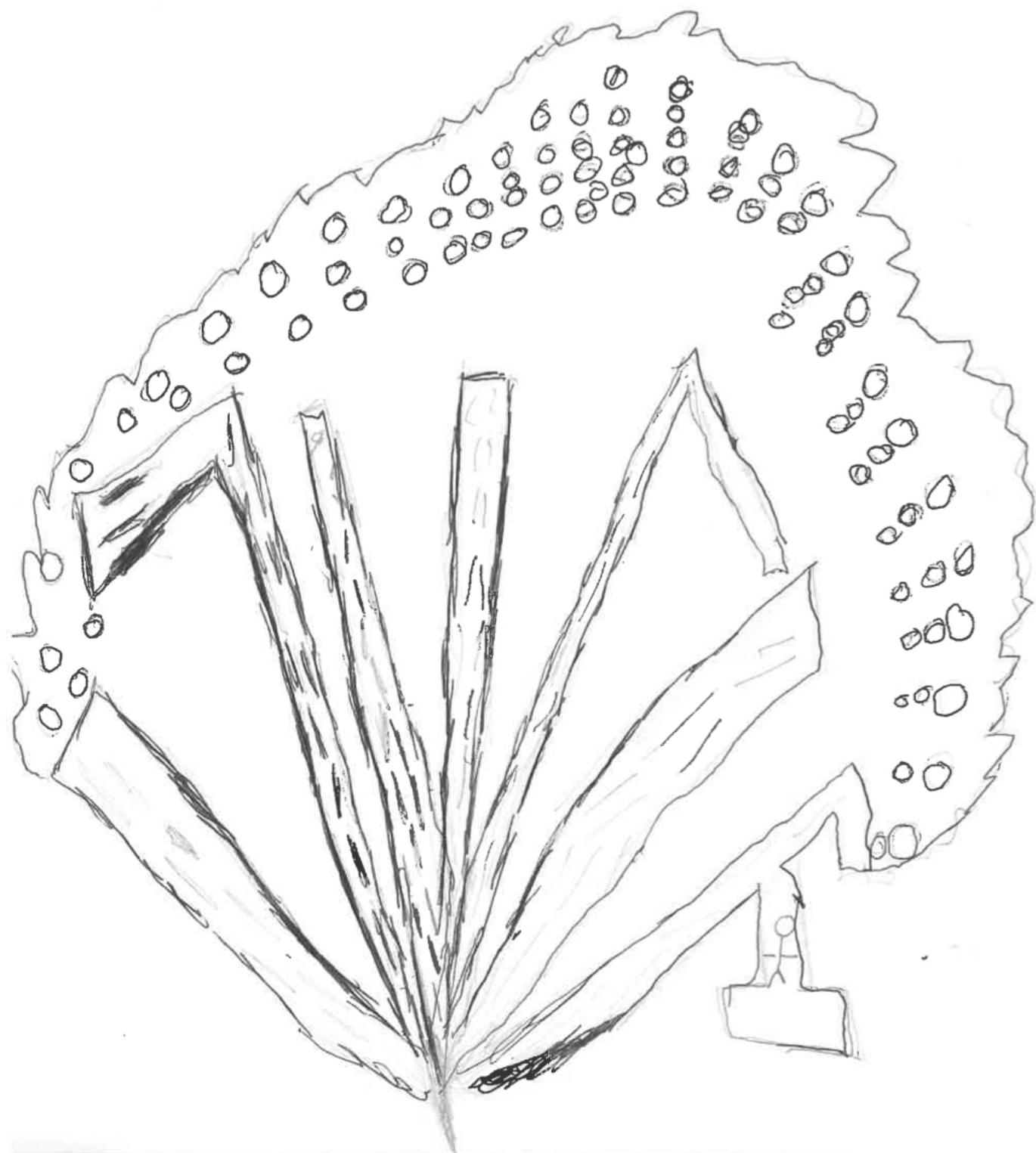
⁸⁸ <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/c376c9-dormant-accounts-fund/>

**"We're always on the periphery. 'Yeah, we've included but you're out there, you know, you're not in here".
- Course Coordinators Group Participant**

Specifically, this report as it pertains to the Mincéirs Mental Health Course signposts the need for a more straightforward path to accreditation for organisations such as The Traveller Counselling Service and The National Traveller Mental Health Network, who are best placed to create a course and content that responds to the needs of their community. Collaboration on The Mincéirs Mental Health Course was also an opportunity for experts in the field and on the ground, to reflect on and consider ways forward for Traveller education programmes. Through drawing comparisons with other Indigenous programmes on an international level, we can begin to imagine the scope for future education programmes that build on the success of the Mincéirs Mental Health Course and Traveller-led initiatives. The pathway, however, depends on a greater commitment at Government level through policies that acknowledge the Traveller community as holding the key to Traveller issues. This research, as well as the learnings gleaned from our indigenous colleagues internationally, made clear five pertinent ideas that are put forward here more broadly as signposting:

- In line with other Indigenous cultures globally (Inuits, Sami, Aboriginals, Maoris, Torres Straits Islanders, First-Nation Canadians), (a) Traveller Studies Department(s) within (a) higher education institution(s) should be established to implement, support, and oversee Traveller education initiatives and Traveller research.
- A commitment at Government level must be made to increase Traveller employment in the education sector by setting a specific target; similar to the one supported by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy, to increase Traveller occupation across all education levels in Ireland.
- The Government of Ireland must financially support grassroots education initiatives and Traveller-led learning models.
- The current model of education in Ireland must be re-thought to be more culturally inclusive for Traveller students.
- The current accreditation structure in Ireland needs to facilitate the inclusion of non-mainstream courses developed by Travellers and other excluded groups, as a pathway for further learning and employment.

The Mincéirs Mental Health Course placed Traveller mental health front and centre to deliver a course by the community for the community, which as emphasised in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, resulted in a programme with its own identity, integrity, and purpose. Holding out for a solution whereby the system of accreditation must adapt to fit in with the Mincéirs Mental Health Course, rather than the other way around, may turn out to be worth the wait.



BREAKING DOWN WALLS

Another senseless passing
Of a vibrant Traveller teen
who could not cope
and lost all hope
while signs remained unseen

Not deserving our discrimination
Our place in society high
with inclusion our right
Devoid of a fight
Unfair stereotypes we defy

We must hold close our Traveller traditions
It is key to our cultural state
We are the foundation
of the next generation
for whom changes we now can create

We are breaking down walls for young Travellers
Smashing bricks of restriction and pain
As the strong mallet knocks
all our barriers and blocks
our empowering stance we regain

The enemy suicide defeated
we are champions we stand back and kick
Our spark now ignited
we stand strong united
as we build ourselves up *brick by brick*

**Excerpt from 'Breaking Down Walls' by Offaly Traveller Movement Youth Project with
Saranne Lovett**

Glossary





National Traveller
Mental Health
Network



ANNUAL NATIONAL TRAVELLER MENTAL HEALTH DAY

8TH OCTOBER 2021

Suicide is **7 times higher** in the Traveller community, and 82% of the community have been affected by suicide.

In solidarity, and to mark National Traveller Mental Health Day 2021, Maynooth University students will be handing out pins outside the **Maynooth Students Union** on **Weds 6th October** from **12.30-1.30**.

Get involved! How are you marking National Traveller Mental Health Day?

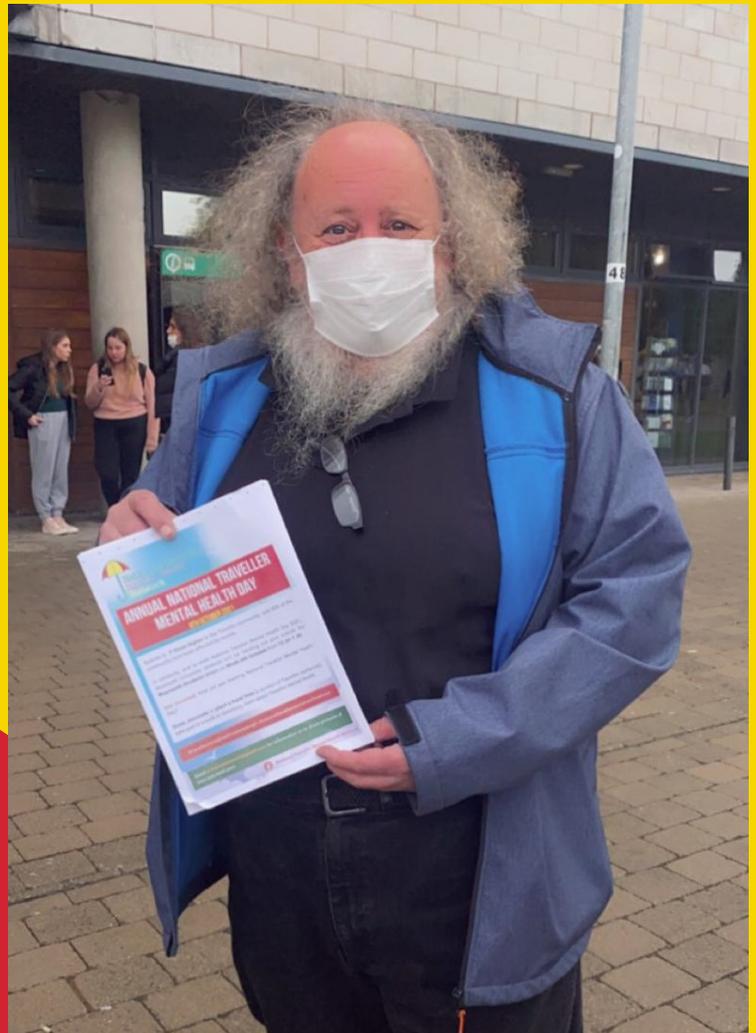
Draw, decorate or **plant a hazel tree** (a symbol of Traveller resilience); take part in a walk or ceremony; learn about Traveller mental health.

#travellermentalhealthisahumanright #nationaltravellermentalhealthnetwork

Email n.travmhnetwork@gmail.com for information or to share pictures of how you took part.



National Traveller Mental Health Network







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