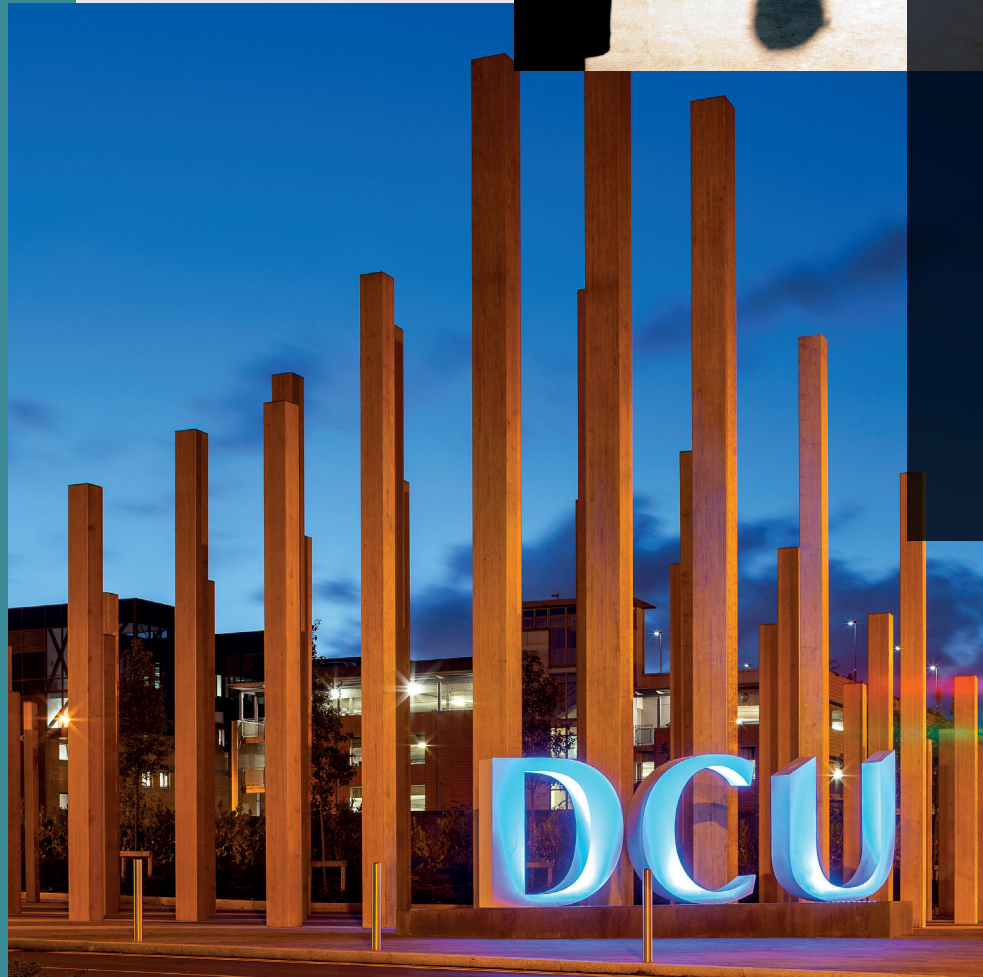




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AN TIONAD NÁISIÚNTA TAIGHDE AGUSACMHAINNE DON FHRITHBHULAÍOCHT  
NATIONAL ANTI-BULLYING RESEARCH AND RESOURCE CENTRE



## Empowering Roma Children:

Tackling Bullying and Victimization in schools  
in Ireland, Policy Advisory and Guidelines



# Empowering Roma Children:

## Tackling Bullying and Victimisation in schools in Ireland, Policy Advisory and Guidelines

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The present report has been produced by the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) at Dublin City University (DCU), arising from research on the experiences of Roma children in schools in Ireland. The research was carried out over a two-year period as part of a project called Breathe: Bullying and Discrimination of Roma Children which was part-funded by the EU Commission under the Rights, Equality, and Citizenship Programme, the Department of Education under the Action Plan on Bullying (2013), and Dublin City University. The report was prepared by the research team in partnership with representatives from the Roma community.

The policy advice and guidelines contained in this report are based on:

- a critical review of the best policy and practice among *National Roma Integration Strategies* (NRIS) of the 27 countries of the European Union (Kuldas, 2020);
- recommendations from two international seminars on policies and legislations for Roma inclusion (i.e., views of Roma representatives, NGOs, and researchers);
- reviews of literature on Roma ethnicity and ethnicity-based bullying/victimisation;
- interviews with and observations of a convenience sample of Roma parents and children in Ireland;
- views and advices of Roma representative and advocacy centres in Ireland and Cyprus; and
- the UNESCO whole-education approach to tackling bullying (UNESCO, 2020).

This report provides suggestions to support the empowerment of Roma children in tackling bullying/victimisation in schools in Ireland. Empowerment means re-building or restoring the self- and collective-agency of Roma children and parents to notice (e.g., knowing their rights and knowing what bullying/victimisation is) and take legal actions (e.g., reporting) against bullying/victimisation. The concept of empowerment opposes the view that tackling bullying/victimisation is a matter for Roma children and parents to achieve on their own. The concept of “empowerment” valorises the responsibility of policy and practice in *disempowering* Roma children and parents. The concept hereby devalorises the responsibility of Roma children in the creation of the ongoing *heritable* disadvantaged backgrounds.

The National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) is a University designated research centre located in DCU’s Institute of Education. The Centre hosts the UNESCO Chair on Tackling Bullying in Schools and Cyberspace, and is known globally for its research excellence in bullying and online safety. It is home to scholars with a global reputation as leaders in the field. The work of the Centre builds on 25 years of research in which we were the first in Ireland to undertake studies on school, workplace, homophobic and cyber bullying.

The aim of ABC is to contribute to solving the real-world problems of bullying and promoting online safety through collaboration with an extensive community of academic, community, and industry partnerships. The extent of our resources and the collaboration between disciplines drive quality education, understanding and innovation in this field.

The objectives of the Centre are aligned to support the UN’s overarching goal to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (SDG4) and supports the implementation of the Government of Ireland’s Action Plan on Bullying (2013), Action Plan for Online Safety (2018-2019), Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2024), and the WRC/HSA Joint Code of Practice on the Prevention and Resolution of Bullying at Work (2021)”.

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# Part I: Policy Advisory

## 1. Bullying and Victimization among Roma Children in Ireland

### 1.1. Roma Ethnic Minority in Ireland

“Roma” stands for a heterogeneous community who identify themselves as Sinti/ Manush, Kalé, Romanichals, Gypsy, or Traveller on the basis of sharing a North Indian origin of ethnicity, history, culture, and language (Council of Europe, 2012). Several social subgroups like Kelderash, Lovari, Gurbeti, Churari, and Ursari constitute the Roma ethnicity (Council of Europe, 2012). An accurate number for the Roma population in Ireland is yet to be estimated due to several reasons: (a) most government services do not currently collect data on ethnicity, (b) ‘Roma’ is not included as an ethnic group in the Census under ethnic/cultural background, and (c) there is no uniform human rights-based approach to ethnic data collection in government services (Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre & Department of Justice and Equality, 2018). However, data has recently become available on the number of primary and post-primary school students who declared themselves as Roma ethnicity or ethnic-cultural background (Tickner, 2017). A total of 1,585 primary pupils and 526 post-primary pupils enrolled in 2017/2018 identified themselves as Roma or with Roma ethnic/cultural background (Statistics Section of the Department of Education, 2019).

Roma children are of the most vulnerable ethnic minority, which has been suffering from discrimination, stigmatisation, and social exclusion in countries across Europe throughout history (Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2019). Roma children are born into this ethnically disadvantaged background, which espouses them to ethnicity-based bullying/victimisation in school. This is an adverse factor for policies that aim to assist Roma children for educational and social inclusion (Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2019) in Ireland. To this aim, the Education Act (1998) recognises that school education is not just a civil right for its citizens but is a human right for everyone in Ireland.

*“An act to make provision in the interests of the common good for the education of every person in the State, including any person with a disability or who has other special educational needs... to ensure that the education system is accountable to students, their parents and the State for education provided, respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society...”*

## 1.2. Ethnicity-Based Bullying and Victimisation

To bully a person or group for an ethnical reason and/or purpose, which is based on ethnic identity or origin of both perpetrator and target, is defined as ethnicity-based bullying (Kuldass et al., 2021a). Ethnicity-based bullying has much in common with other types of bullying in that both are characterised by aggressive behaviour, target directed, intentional, repeated overtime, and involve power imbalances (Kuldass et al., 2021b). However, the distinctive feature of ethnicity-based bullying is that bullies have an ethnical motivation (reason or purpose) or victims perceive their race or ethnicity as the main reason for being bullied (Rodriguez-Hidalgo et al., 2019).

## 1.3. How prevalent is Ethnicity-based Bullying and Victimisation?

In a survey representing about 80% of Roma population living across nine countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) in 2016, almost one in two (four out of 10) Roma felt discriminated against because of their ethnicity at least once in the past five years; but, one in four Roma perceived this discrimination in the last 12 months (see Kuldass et al., 2021b for a review of the survey). Based on such findings, it is commonly believed that children of indigenous, ethnic, or racial minorities are at risk of suffering from bullying victimisation (United Nations General Assembly, 2016). The belief is that (a) ethnic-minority students are bullied because of their ethnicity (United Nations General Assembly, 2016; UNESCO, 2019) and that (b) bullies are likely to be more prevalent among ethnic majority than ethnic minority groups (Vitoroulis & Vaillancourt, 2018). However, the common beliefs lack evidential bases. Two meta-analyses representing 692,548 children and adolescents (6 -18 years old) in the US, Canada and Europe concluded that ethnicity, assessed as a demographic characteristic, had no significant association with peer victimisation (Vitoroulis & Vaillancourt, 2015). A similar result for bullying perpetration was recorded in a meta- analysis representing 740,176 children and adolescents in the same countries where there was no significant direct association between ethnicity and bullying perpetration (Vitoroulis & Vaillancourt, 2018).

In Ireland, we found similar findings supporting the argument that peer-victimisation and bullying perpetration is not *directly* or *only* based on ethnicity. Research conducted by the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre in preparation for this report found that bullying and/or victimisation did not appear to be dependent on ethnicity per se (as the direct criteria) among 181 pupils from different ethnic groups (i.e., Roma, Irish, and Other) in primary schools across Ireland. Self-reports by Roma (n=45), Irish (n=72), and other ethnic group (n=64) showed no statistical association of ethnicity with peer victimisation or bullying behaviour.

However, there is cumulative evidence for *indirect* associations of ethnicity with bullying/victimisation which highlights the role of contextual variables, particularly classroom ethnic composition (Kuldass et al, 2021a, b). Hence, the prevalence of peer victimisation among ethnic majority versus minority students is more successfully captured when the proportions of ethnic groups are taken into account; such as whether a classroom/school has more or less diversity of ethnic minorities (Kuldass et al, 2021a, b).

## 1.4. Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools

In 2013, the Department of Education and Skills published an *Action Plan on Bullying* and related *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*. The aim of these procedures was to tackle bullying/victimisation in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland. The procedures require all boards of school management to produce an anti-bullying policy and consider eight guiding principles of best practice in tackling bullying: (1) a positive school culture and climate, (2) effective leadership, (3) a school-wide approach, (4) a shared understanding of bullying and its impact, (5) implementation of education and prevention strategies, (6) effective supervision and monitoring of pupils, (7) supports for staff, (8) consistent recording, investigation and procedures for bullying behaviour. These procedures also reference identity-based bullying such as racist bullying (Department of Education and Skills, 2013a). They also articulate that the responsibility for tackling bullying lies with the local school.




## 2. An Overview of Policy Shifts: From Exclusion to Inclusion of Roma

According to a critical review of legislations on the educational inclusion of Roma in 27 EU countries, the best policy approach to combatting Roma exclusion is based on the understanding that Roma exclusion in society is not a result of weaknesses, values, lifestyles, or failures of Roma, but primarily a result of structural discrimination (Kuldas, 2020). Roma people have experienced prolonged structural problems (e.g., lacking the principle of equality, non-discriminatory practice of life) which are reinforced by economic, political, social, and cultural factors. A policy approach to tackling Roma exclusion in Ireland should not be based on the presupposition that social and school adaptability or integration is a matter for Roma individuals to achieve on their own. Such an approach places the responsibility of Roma children to overcome adversity (e.g., discrimination and bullying) on them and thus takes away the responsibility of the country or ethnic majority in reducing or eliminating negative effects or consequences of such adversity.

In Ireland, Roma inclusion is primarily viewed as *an immigration control issue as opposed to a human rights issue* (Nasc, 2013). The control view is incompatible with the concept of inclusion. *Roma inclusion* is a two-way process; a change in the mind-set of people among (1) the ethnic majority (non-Roma) and (2) Roma ethnic minority. An effective prevention or reduction of ethnicity-based bullying/victimisation requires a shift in inclusion/exclusion policies at school and community levels (European Union, 2019).

One cannot consider ethnicity-based bullying/victimisation without considering the wider context and history of the Roma community who since the 14<sup>th</sup> century have experienced periods of being enslaved, marginalised, and oppressed within wider societies. More than 700 years of victimisation across Europe has pushed Roma to the edge of society where they suffer from poverty, lacking basic competencies (e.g., literacy and communication skills), and lifelong learning opportunities. **This historic and systematic deprivation has distanced Roma from employment, income and educational opportunities as well as social and community networks and activities.** The problems experienced by Roma were compounded by assimilation policies in most countries which only served to further alienate and isolate members of the Roma community who resisted being forced to change their lifestyles and culture. However, in the past ten years, *anti-discrimination of Roma* has become a human and minority rights issue and visible progress for Roma inclusion / anti-Roma discrimination is now expected at all levels of society in Ireland and the European Union.



Recent policy approaches now recognise the need to include Roma in decisions about themselves. “One of the lessons learned during the previous policy initiatives towards Roma was that Roma participation is a necessary ingredient if any progress on their situation is to be made” (Rostas & Kovacs, 2020. p. 7). Roma participation in policy-making for educational and social services at local, national and EU level is a precondition for tackling the exclusion of Roma (European Commission, 2020). This precondition is an enabler of equality and inclusion, which in turn promotes democratic and efficient governance (European Commission, 2020). **Therefore, promoting Roma participation is central to guidelines for planning and implementing national Roma integration goals across EU countries (European Commission, 2020).**

### 3. Inclusive Policy for Tackling Bullying and Victimisation against Roma Children

Bullying involves practices of domination that deprive a person, group, or community of the capacity for agency, the inability to act or to do anything legally against bullying (Department of Education and Skills, 2013b; Sercombe & Donnelly, 2013). Therefore, tackling direct and indirect bullying and “multigenerational exclusion” (European Commission, 2020) is crucial to rebuilding or restoration of the loss of self- and collective-agency and thus to the equal participation of Roma children in education. Providing Roma with an opportunity to participate in education, opens the way to personal (self-agency) and community (collective-agency) empowerment (European Commission, 2020).

Given that an aggressive behaviour is considered bullying when it is repeated overtime and based on power imbalance, *Roma children should be empowered/enabled to prevent the repetition of an aggressive behaviour*. Empowered Roma children will be those who (a) recognise or notice peer behaviours against their ethnic identity, which either hurt them verbally, physically or indirectly (social exclusion); and (b) who are encouraged to report this aggressive behaviour before it turns into bullying/victimisation. To this aim, educational policy makers need to adopt a new approach, to shift the current focus from risk factors (ethnicity-based bullying/victimisation), which are not always possible to eliminate in a short time, to **protective factors that empower Roma children to speak up for their rights**. The new focus should be on how some Roma children thrive against all odds rather than just examining failures or disadvantages they face. This is a suggestion for focusing on protective factors (i.e., teachers, parents, and community members) that empower human potential rather than solely focusing on eliminating various risk factors (bullying) that promote failure.

Despite their socially excluded backgrounds or prolonged exposure to adversity (discrimination, stigmatisation, or bullying), which disempowers the majority of Roma children in school education, some are empowered and educationally successful. This empowerment happens when school staff (teachers and principals), parents, and community members (representatives, mediators, or assistants) *collaborate* to make a desirable change as outlined below in the “UNESCO Whole-Education Approach” to tackling bullying (UNESCO, 2020) **which should be promoted in any policy**. The following Part II provides guiding principles and to make the desirable changes.

## Part 2: Guidelines for Educational Policy relating to Roma students in Ireland

Almost every educational policy for Roma children refers to principles and mechanisms to achieve certain aims (e.g., prevention or remediation of ethnicity-based bullying/victimisation, higher educational attainment, and Roma inclusion in the workforce). Yet, these policies and frameworks often lack clarity and concrete steps to achieve real change in the lives of Roma children. Based on the UNESCO whole-education approach (UNESCO, 2020) and our extensive review of the literature and data available, we advise consideration of the following principles, which presuppose that despite the best efforts of members of the Roma community a wider systemic approach is needed if we are to fulfil our obligations under the UN Sustainable Development Goals to “ensure an inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030” (SDG4).

The Whole-Education Approach (UNESCO, 2020)	Recommendations for Empowering Roma children
Strong political leadership and robust legal and policy framework	Anti-bullying laws and policies for inclusive education should explicitly address Roma ethnicity and ethnic identity-based bullying/victimisation. School anti-bullying policies should be specifically designed to account for student diversity, equality and inclusion.
Curriculum, learning & teaching to promote caring school climate	<p>The school curriculum, or at least some teaching materials (e.g., history subject), that are based on intercultural policies, should include Roma history and culture (i.e., introducing the ethnic identity of Roma). In particular, the commemoration of Roma Holocaust by the Nazi Germany should be included. This best explains the historical and ongoing disadvantaged position of Roma in Europe and should outline the impact of transgenerational trauma that can be carried through Roma families. The participation of representatives of the Roma community should be encouraged in the development of teaching material on Roma identity (history, culture, and language).</p> <p>A subject or class of the Romani language (i.e., opportunities to learn the mother tongue) could be offered to Roma children, especially at pre-school and primary school levels. The education of Roma pupils should however remain an integral part of the general educational system (i.e., classroom or school segregation must be avoided). The offer should take into account cultural, social and economic backgrounds, particularly sub-groups and Romani dialects of the Roma population in Europe.</p>

### Collaboration and partnerships between the education sector and a wide range of partners (e.g., NGOs and academia)

An allocation of resources for the education of Roma children needs to be based on coordination with Roma representative centres at the town, county, national, and international/EU levels.

### Involvement of all stakeholders in the school community, including parents

Anti-bullying initiatives should include all stakeholders from the school community (principals and of managements, teachers, students, and parents) and the wider social community (i.e., Roma representatives).

Teacher-Parent association or communication, where necessary, should include mediators or assistants from the Roma community. Appointing Roma education assistants as home-school liaison coordinator could also help to ensure Roma parents' participation in the education system. Teacher and mediators could inform and guide Roma parents on support mechanisms that the respective county council or the Department of Education provide. This information and guidance should be aimed at building the capacity of Roma parents and children to become fully aware of their rights and *to become advocates for those rights*.

The Home School Community Liaison Scheme (Department of Education and Skills, 2019) should have an Ethnic Community Advisory Council (at town, county, or national level) and include Roma representatives who can advise on active participation of Roma children and parents in tackling bullying/victimisation.

**Safe psychological and physical school and classroom environment**

School staff (principals, teachers, and officers) should provide a caring environment where Roma children and parents feel safe, secure, welcomed and supported. Every incident of bullying and victimisation that Roma children experience should be recognised and responded to on time.

**Training and support for teachers**

Initial Teacher Education programs on Roma ethnicity, social structures, history, and socio-cultural norms, should be provided. Such programs should aim to raise teachers' awareness of strengths and weaknesses of Roma children, helping them to avoid misunderstanding their Roma pupils. Representatives of the Roma community who have the competence (i.e., able to articulate historical and social-psychological aspects of victimisation of Roma and consequences) should be directly involved in the delivery of information to future teachers.


Training and recruitment of education assistants and teachers from within the Roma community should be encouraged. This can function as a role model for Roma children as well as evidence for them to believe in the employability of Roma.

**Student empowerment and participation**

To ensure anti-bullying policy and practice are inclusive of all students, an active participation of students who belong to Roma ethnic minority in the design and implementation of bullying prevention strategies should be assured.

**Reporting mechanisms for students affected by bullying, together with support and referral services**

There should be reporting channels and mechanisms that assure Roma children as well as school staff of their privacy, safety, and security, so that they feel they can talk about bullying and victimisation to a trusted person in the school.



**Evidence: monitoring  
of school bullying and  
evaluation of responses**

Monitoring and evaluation of educational policies for Roma pupils should be based on basic benchmarks. All the stakeholders involved in the education of Roma children should be invited to take part in developing these benchmarks and the monitoring process. Evaluation of an educational policy and practice/result should not be limited to estimates of school attendance and drop-out rates.

Research is needed for an evidence-based evaluation of needs and progress for Roma inclusion at town and county level. Prospective findings should be publicly disseminated.



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