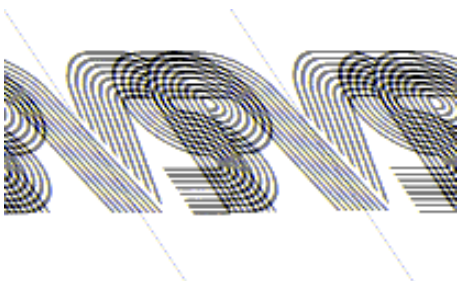


**Submission on the Intercultural  
Education Strategy from the Society of  
St Vincent de Paul Social Justice and  
Policy Team  
October 2008**



## **Introduction**

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVP) is the largest voluntary organisation of social concern and action in Ireland. Our 9,500 volunteers and staff provide a range of social services for children and families including family visitation, breakfast clubs and after school projects, education grants, crèches and preschools.

Our members know that education is a key route out of poverty and social exclusion. We see at first hand the problems facing parents who cannot afford the various costs associated with attending primary and secondary school, the escalating costs of keeping a student at third level and the way that these issues are compounded for many children from a migrant background due to a lack of access to financial support for attending school and the barriers to accessing the free fees and grant schemes at third level. Our members are aware of the frustrations and disappointments experienced by people who have come to Ireland to seek protection, to work or to study and who have made their homes here only to find that they and their children cannot access the educational system on an equal footing with other residents.

At a time when essential services such as language support are being cut and class sizes increased, SVP welcomes the development of an Intercultural Education Strategy which should provide a framework to prevent educational disadvantage among migrants in Ireland. It is essential that the resource implications of implementing this strategy are met.

### **Capturing the experience of our members:**

The Social Justice Committee of the SVP has a mechanism for gathering the experience of the membership of the Society as it relates to issues of social policy and concern. This is known as the 'From The Ground Up' project team, and it takes samples of the experiences of our conferences throughout the country which then inform our policy positions.

This team has identified a number of issues around education which have an impact on migrants and their children which must be considered in the development of an intercultural education strategy. These issues include:

- The cost of attending school
- Language barriers
- The different rights and entitlements and barriers to accessing education for some migrants, and the conditions attached to different residency status
- The need for accessible information about the educational system

### **Scope and aims of the Strategy**

We would ask that the scope and aims of the strategy are outlined, and in particular we would like to see the strategy developed to include early childhood educational settings, primary, post primary and further education. The strategy should also be linked with education provided outside of the formal sector, for example through the youthwork sector, and as such should be cognisant of initiatives already being undertaken in this area, for example in relation to the development of an intercultural strategy for youthwork.

### **Proposed principles:**

SVP is broadly supportive of the four principles outlined on which it is proposed that the Intercultural Education Strategy will be based. However, the Society feels strongly that the overriding principle on which the strategy should be based is providing access to education for all individuals resident in the state, regardless of their citizenship/immigration status.

### *Mainstreaming of education*

SVP welcomes the proposal to mainstream intercultural education through the development of inclusive practices by and for all involved in the education of migrant and host communities. However, the strategy cannot be based on a 'migrant' and 'host community' dichotomy. Many of the children attending Irish schools who are from migrant backgrounds have been born in Ireland and some are Irish citizens. In addition to this, individuals and families who have made

their home in Ireland have a range of immigration statuses, with an associated range of rights and entitlements which will affect their access to education.

*Knowledge of English and Irish for all residents*

Knowledge of English and Irish is essential for all residents in order to allow them to access the educational system fully at all levels. The onus to ensure that language and literacy classes are provided for migrants who need them must be on the educational system.

*Rights and responsibilities, high aspirations and high expectations should be the same for all students*

SVP supports this principle but asks that the responsibility of educational system to be responsive to the needs of all service users is also noted here.

*Partnership and engagement through dialogue with the wider education community*

Partnership and engagement with the wider educational community is essential. This should include engagement with organisations in the community and voluntary sector, as well as engagement with other relevant stakeholders such as the National Educational Welfare Board, National Educational Psychological Service and the National Council for Special Education.

In addition to the four principles which are outlined in the discussion document, SVP would like to see the strategy based on a number of further principles:

- Ensuring access to education for all who are resident in the state, regardless of their citizenship or immigration status.
- The prevention of educational disadvantage.
- Recognising diversity as the norm.
- Equality.
- Partnership and engagement with parents - this is essential in order to allow parents to fulfil their role as the primary educators of their children and to

recognise that parental involvement in education is critical to educational success.

### **Proposed actions**

The actions which are outlined in this section should support the principles of the strategy. In addition to the proposed actions outlined, SVP asks for the following:

- Pre-service and in-service teacher training to build the confidence and capacity of providers to engage with issues around intercultural education and working in an environment which is characterised by ethnic and linguistic diversity.
- Appropriate pre-service and in-service training for language support teachers and classroom teachers in teaching English as an additional language and working with children whose first language is not English.
- Development of cultural mediation and interpreting services for schools to allow parents to engage fully with their child's school.
- Research to establish the impact on schools of having large numbers of children from migrant backgrounds, and how schools are responding to the needs of these students, with a particular emphasis on schools in disadvantaged areas.
- Support for parents to allow them to engage fully with their child's education. Barriers to participation in education and language training for parents should be removed, and supports to access education provided for all parents, regardless of their immigration status.

### **Policy challenges and responses**

#### *Limited Resources*

A serious policy challenge in the current economic climate is limited resources and the failure to recognise the importance of keeping in place resources for education and the prevention of educational disadvantage. Budget 2009 re-imposes the cap of two language support teachers per school, irrespective of the number of children who need this essential service. It is presumed that the commitment under Towards 2016 to provide "enhanced support for the

effective integration of international children at both primary and second level through the provision of an extra 550 language support teachers by 2009”<sup>1</sup> is also being postponed. Increased class sizes will also make it more difficult for classroom teachers to give individual students the attention they need and combined with the loss of language support resources is likely to make it very difficult for children from migrant backgrounds to achieve their potential in the educational system. SVP is extremely disappointed that commitments to reduce pupil teacher ratios and provide adequate levels of language support made under *Towards 2016* have been abandoned.

#### *Conditions attached to residency status*

The conditions attached to residency status are a major challenge to integration and to ensuring that children from a migrant background receive a good education. The different rights and entitlements afforded to different ‘categories’ of people living in Ireland - including citizens, residents, asylum seekers, refugees, economic migrants and their spouses and children, people on student visas, undocumented migrants, parents of Irish Born Children etc. - impacts on access to education through limited access to financial help for the cost of education as well as removing the right to free state primary and secondary education for some children (namely the children of student visa holders resident in Ireland).

The imposition of international fees and restricted access to grants at third level mean that continuing on to third level education is impossible for some migrants and children of migrant backgrounds living in Ireland. Young people from outside the EU whose parents are working in Ireland are particularly affected by this, as are people who have received leave to remain on the basis of being the parent of an Irish Born Child. This will affect access to employment and earnings potential, and creates barriers to integration. Restricting access to third level education may also impact on retention rates at second level.

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Ireland (2006) *Towards 2016*. Dublin: Stationery Office. P 43

SVP assists many migrant families with the cost of education at primary, post primary and third level. Low income families who do not satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition are not entitled to receive the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, and many are turning to the SVP for help at the pressure point of back to school time. The Society is also providing financial support to some young people of migrant backgrounds who wish to go on to third level education but who are asked to pay international fees and have no access to grants.

Removing the financial and administrative barriers to accessing education is the first step in responding to the policy challenges which are related to the provision of good education to children, young people and adults from a migrant background. The relaxation of the Habitual Residence Condition and the restoration of child benefit as a universal payment would help in alleviating the financial barriers to accessing education which are experienced by some migrants. Allowing people who are resident in Ireland to access education on the same basis as Irish citizens is essential to support the proposed principles of the Intercultural Education Strategy.

*Lack of provision of quality and affordable Early Childhood Care and Education*

The Commission of European Communities Green Paper<sup>2</sup> points out that access to pre-school education can yield major benefits for children of a migrant background, particularly when it focuses on language development. The Society of St Vincent de Paul has consistently argued for the provision of a half-day state-funded Early Childhood Care and Education session for all children and for the implementation of the early education strand of the DEIS programme. We acknowledge that this is a difficult economic climate, however, an investment in early childhood care and education will yield major benefits, both for the future of the economy and for the children who are able to access such a service. Access to early education must be a consideration in the development of this strategy.

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<sup>2</sup> Commission of the European Communities (2008) Green Paper: *Migration and Mobility: challenges for EU education systems*. Available from: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/school21/com423\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/school21/com423_en.pdf)

**Conclusion**

The development of an Intercultural Education Strategy with the aim of preventing educational disadvantage and enhancing access to the educational system for migrants is to be welcomed. In a challenging economic environment, access to education remains a key route out of poverty and social exclusion. The Society of St Vincent de Paul sees first hand the barriers to accessing education which are experienced by migrants - financial, language, information, and administrative barriers - which prevent certain residents from accessing education on the same basis as Irish citizens. It is important to remember that many of the children of migrants are 'first generation' Irish citizens, for whom Ireland is home. The right to education must be extended and supported for all who live in Ireland, regardless of their citizenship or immigration status.