‘Rom Difference To Deviance: The Exclusion Of Gypsy-Traveller Children From School In Scotland’

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We explore issues generated by a current research project exploring the views of teachers and children on the conflicts that may be generated by the meeting of the cultural norms of traveller families with the expectations and value assumptions of schools.

INTRODUCTION

The research discussed in this paper was developed in response to an awareness that, while efforts were being made to encourage traveller children to attend school, at the same time there was some evidence of disciplinary exclusion, particularly at the secondary stage. The aims of the project are to explore how schools perceive the culture of traveller children and its influence on their behaviour, to investigate whether teachers see the behaviour of traveller pupils as problematic and how they respond if they do.

We acknowledge the ethical and methodological issues involved when the research is carried out by sedentary academics, and have addressed this in two ways: first, through a reflexive awareness of our own position and a conscious attempt to reflect the voices of the subjects of the research, and second, through the bringing into the project of interviewers who are travellers. This is work still in progress, the paper represents our thinking at this stage of the process.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

This project has its origins in a conversation between two colleagues, now in the research team, who had been involved in earlier related pieces of work, the collection of data on school attendance by the Scottish traveller Education Project (STEP) (Jordan 1996) and the government-funded investigation of exclusion from school in Scotland (Cullen et al. 1996). It seemed that there were issues generated by the wider research on exclusion, to do with the ability of schools to respond to differences in pupils, which might be helpful in exploring the exclusion of traveller pupils from participation in schooling. STEP is a Scottish Office-funded centre that provides consultancy and information on traveller education and has a wide range of contacts with traveller organizations and related groups. Initial soundings with these suggested that there was support for this kind of investigation.

Interviews are being carried out in rural and urban areas of Scotland with mainstream primary and secondary school staff, traveller teachers and other support workers, and with traveller parents and children from both gypsy-traveller and show traveller families. As with any marginalized group, identifying potential traveller interviewees has been a slow and complicated process of negotiation. In particular, where young people or their families have had a difficult or upsetting experience of school, they may not be willing to trust us with their views. Accordingly, we have negotiated through a range of intermediaries. We have carried out some interviews and some have been conducted by others with longer relationships with some traveller groups. Interviews are conducted informally, wherever the interviewee feels comfortable, and are taped and transcribed. Most interviews with gypsy-traveller young people have taken place in their homes, whether housed or living in a trailer. It is intended to complete the data collection by May 1998.
GYPSY-TRAVELLERS AS AN ETHNIC MINORITY?

There has been considerable argument between academics and within gypsy-traveller communities over the issue of gypsy-traveller identity and in particular the use of the term ethnic minority (Fraser 1992). The history of the groups has been written by and largely from the perspective of settled observers (Kenny 1997). Depending on the context, the terms gypsy and traveller can be understood as having sometimes the same or distinctively different meanings. However, there is strong evidence for the recognition of common cultural features among European nomadic groups, described variously as gypsies, travellers and rom or roma (Liegeois 1987). This does not deny the existence of variation in language and history resulting from the interaction of these groupings with the sedentary communities of the countries in which they live. As Kenny argues: 'The sociology of Gypsies and Traveller is also that of the societies in which they are immersed and their history insofar as recorded, one of their treatment by the sedentary ....' (Kenny 1997: 9).

This recognition of shared cultural practices and norms allows us to acknowledge the contemporary and historical distinctiveness of these groupings without using arguments dependent on biological and genealogical criteria. Fraser demonstrates that 'to attach prime importance to such criteria quickly leads to absurd demarcations: Gypsy populations like others, have a mixture of ancestral strains' (Fraser 1992: 5). Even in the racist horrors of the Third Reich it was not possible to construct clear genealogical criteria for the identification of gypsies. A travelling existence on the boundaries of settled societies leads to a culture that responds to and interacts with those it meets and will reflect both historically transmitted and valued features distinctive to the group and also shared and borrowed or transformed characteristics of the mainstream culture (Okely 1983, Reid 1997). We are using the notion of culture, not as fixed and measurable, but as constantly being reconstructed and redefined.

We accept Jenkin's notion of ethnic boundaries as permeable, as existing despite, and because of, interaction across them (Jenkin 1994). Self-ascribed and other-ascribed ethnicity are equally interactive (Okely 1983). Our social identity will include not only a greater or lesser awareness of membership of an ethnic group, majority or minority, but also a range of other aspects including, for example, age, gender, class, nationality. Different aspects of our identity may be important or asserted at different times. 'To be a traveller one does not need to assert it continually' (Husband 1989). Kendall (1997) points out that the traveller community is not a homogeneous 'whole' and that their exclusion from the majority society may lead to 'stronger' members excluding 'weaker" members, for example men excluding women, English travellers excluding Irish travellers. Difference is fundamental to our conceptions of identity, for travellers as for others (Braid 1997).

The Council of Europe has identified two main groupings of travellers, gypsies-travellers and occupational travellers. A third group is also often identified, that of the more recent 'new' travellers. This paper focuses particularly on the issues identified from the research to do with gypsy-traveller pupils. The project however did include a group of occupational travellers, show (fairground) travellers and relevant comparisons will be made although these are not discussed in this paper.

SCOTTISH GYPSY-TRAVELLERS

In Scotland, tinker, tinkler and gypsy have been used to describe travellers. Most of the literature (Fraser 1992, Jordan 1996) accepts that there were large travelling groups in Scotland prior to the documented arrival in Europe of groups described as Egyptians or gypsies and that there was subsequent interaction and interrelationships between these groups and with subsequent waves of visiting travellers. The history of travellers in Scotland, as in other countries, reflects their relationship with the settled population and there is historical evidence of changes in response to periods of particular persecution, for example as in other parts of Europe in the seventeenth century the adoption by many gypsies of names commonly in use in Scotland.
Reid, a Scottish traveller, states that: 'Arguments about the nature and characteristics of the 'true' Gypsy/Traveller are tiresome, outdated and misdirected.... Although Gypsies/Travellers have a strong identity that we defend fiercely, we are just as confused as others as to our origins.... Regardless of theories of origin Gypsies/Travellers remain a distinct ethnic group and are aware of the distinctive nature of the group' (Reid 1997). The distinctive features of Scottish gypsy-traveller culture include features common to gypsy-traveller groups across Europe, including, for example, pollution taboos, notions of descent and a traditional hostility to wage labour and preference for self employment (Okely 1983). Fundamental is perhaps what Kenny (1997) calls the 'nomadic mindset', regardless of whether currently travelling. Cant, the language historically used by Scottish gypsy-travellers, reflects their complex history with many shared characteristics with other traveller languages like Irish Shelta but also with significant words from Romani as well as from Scots and Gaelic. This may now be a source of a vocabulary used in private, along with Scottish English.

An official report in 1993 estimated the number of gypsy-travellers in Scotland as around 3000, living most of the year in caravans tents or huts on camping sites of different kinds (Gentleman 1992). These figures are much contested and are likely a considerable underestimate given the historic resistance to official processes. A European report (Liegeois 1987) suggests that there are around 5000 nomadic gypsy-travellers and 12000 housed. Nomadism is seen as a core feature of the gypsy-traveller ethnic identity even for those who no longer travel (Liegeois 1994) so our study included those who are partially or wholly settled.

Participation in formal education is still low, one survey in 1995/96 suggesting that 41% of primary age and 20% of secondary school-age traveller children attended school regularly (SCF 1996).

The Education Act (Scotland) of 1937 provided a dispensation, still in operation today, that recognized the seasonal nature of much work and reduced the obligation for attendance at school for traveller children to 200 attendances between October and April (i.e. 100, which represents half the attendance expected of the sedentary population).

EXCLUSION

We have already noted that our research began as a response to evidence of the disciplinary exclusion of gypsy-travellers from school. It is well documented, and further reflected in our own research, that disciplinary exclusion, while ostensibly a behavioural issue, is inherently connected to a broader social-exclusion of particular groups of pupils, in relation to class, disadvantage, ethnicity and gender. We want to explore further, through both the literature and our own interview data, this broader notion of exclusion as it relates to gypsy-traveller pupils. This could, of course, be argued for other groups of pupils. In the case of travellers however, we would argue that they are particularly vulnerable to the 'exclusionary processes' outlined below. There would seem to be a specific constellation of issues which intensifies differences in culture and acts to produce gypsy-traveller pupils as 'different' and 'problematic' in the context of school. We want first to examine school as an institution, because, in the authors opinion, we need to 'unpack' school practices (as well as traveller culture) in order to understand the reasons why travellers are both excluded from school and self-exclude.

SCHOOL AND POWER

What do we mean then, when we talk about notions of wider social-exclusion and of 'exclusionary processes' and practices? How is this manifested, lived, in relation to gypsy-traveller pupils' experience of school? Of course, different schools will have different approaches to a range of educational issues including behaviour, and this is often dependent on the approach taken by head teachers and senior management (Cullen et al.
But we would argue that over and above differing approaches to issues of discipline and school ethos, schools have an inherently 'normalizing' function and, in short, this is at the heart of the power which schools exercise as institutions. The 'normalizing' function of school acts to produce and reproduce pupils according to the value systems that constitute dominant social relations. When pupils come into conflict with these values, be it because of issues of discipline, ethnicity or gender, then tension and conflict may result, as we will argue is the case for travellers in their specific model of exclusion. As Furlong notes, 'the experience of race, class and gender can be linked to disaffection through an emergent sense of difference and exclusion' (Furlong 1991: 302).

When we talk about school as 'normalizing and this being at the heart of 'power' we can see this in two interrelating ways. First, the power of one individual over another, in this case, the power of the teacher over the pupil. As others have argued (Furlong 1991, Booth 1996, Cullen et al. 1996, Kenny 1997), individual teachers and schools have significant power over their pupils, and this power allows for the possibility of disciplinary exclusion from school. However, we also have to understand power in a different way if we are to know its effects in relation to the exclusionary processes to which Booth (1996) refers. To perceive the essence of power as repressive is to miss its very nature. Foucault argues that if power were only repressive then it begs the question of how individuals could be made always to obey it (Foucault 1980). What makes us accept power and its effects is the very fact that it does not bear down upon us, always telling us how to act - as Foucault argues it does not say 'no'. Rather, power is productive, 'it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledges, produces discourse' (Foucault 1980). Power then, in this sense, is not located only in the state, at the macro level of society. Foucault considered this power to be 'inert' (Foucault 1990). Real power is found in the practices and relationships of everyday life in which knowledges and discourses are reproduced-the 'micro-powers' at work in society, the many powers with their concomitant struggles and resistances that make 'big' (state) power possible and upon which it is contingent. Power then is not just 'up there', rather 'power relations are rooted in the system of social networks' (Foucault 1982).

The everyday practices of teachers in the classroom act to reproduce expected behaviour, the form it takes, the way pupils are supposed to conduct themselves, even perhaps how they should sit. Thus, we witness power rooted in the system of social networks, producing the normalized behaviour expected of all of us. From an educational perspective (and from an early age) children learn that they need to attain certain educational goals to move on to the next stage. The force of these powers then, is their ability to produce and reproduce children within certain value systems, the values of the sedentary, dominant classes:

Through our power, we attempt to get children to accept certain values, to aspire to certain futures for themselves, and to accept and understand their own strengths and limitation. Educational structures - the power of education - is used not just to impose certain sorts of behaviour, but to construct young people in particular ways. We do not use our power simply to force children to act in these ways. Rather we insist that they come to see themselves and organise their lives in these ways. (Furlong 1991: 298)

The essence of this second type of power is that we endeavour to 'produce' children who learn to choose to act in these ways, and this is continually reinforced through the everyday practices of the classroom. To summarize, when we explain schools as normalizing it is because of the powers they have over pupils (in a disciplinary sense) but also the power they exercise in a productive sense, to produce pupils in particular ways.

THE EXCLUSIONARY PROCESSES OF SCHOOL

We have found Booth's (1996) model of exclusion useful in understanding the factors that contribute to both disciplinary exclusion and a wider social / cultural exclusion from mainstream school life. Booth argues that
disciplinary exclusion is not a single event, the point at which the relationship between school and pupil breaks down. We need to look at what he calls the 'devaluations' of certain groups of pupils which precede that event and which contribute to 'exclusionary processes', that is the broader notion of exclusion discussed above. Booth is arguing that the 'devaluations' of certain groups of pupils contribute to disciplinary exclusion, and to a broader sense of exclusion from mainstream school culture even where disciplinary exclusion does not occur.

We would argue that the exclusionary processes to which Booth refers, and which very often lead to instances of disciplinary exclusion, have at their heart the 'productive powers' outlined above, which act to reproduce educational values and societal values to constitute, reproduce and sustain the dominant view of the 'good society'. The essence of this power, in the context of this paper, is in its ability not only to produce pupils in this way, but also to exclude those who resist being 'produced' in this particular form. While gypsy-travellers are economically dependent on the sedentary economy (Okely 1983, Kenny 1997) they have, to a greater or lesser degree, managed to resist assimilation into sedentary society. This resistance extends to educational policies and practices. Even though some gypsy-traveller pupils do attend school, they may refuse to be 'assimilated' completely in it. Rather, they take what they require from it to survive economically, but within their own culture and lifestyle:

Resistance is constitutive of the cultural operations of this open, dependent society, drawing in and transforming whatever it needs to suit its own purposes which are often appositional to those of the dominant society. (Kenny 1997)

So, in what 'broad' ways are Scottish gypsy-travellers excluded from school (as opposed to strictly disciplinary exclusion)? And what can we point to in both the literature and our interview data that might indicate the 'exclusionary processes' which contribute to both exclusion from mainstream school culture and disciplinary exclusion? It is important to note that in looking at 'exclusionary processes' we are not seeking to attribute blame, but rather to open up these processes for scrutiny, so that we can attend to them and look at ways of making school an experience which is valued by gypsy-traveller pupils.

EXCLUSIONARY PROCESSES: DIFFERENCES IN BEHAVIOUR

It was noted by some of our interviewees that gypsy-traveller pupils' behaviour could be disruptive to the rest of the class and that this could cause problems:

Once the boys reached the age of 12, 13, they didn't want to come to school, they were disruptive they couldn't be put in a class with other children, they just completely disrupted the place and we found that a tremendous problem. (Principal teacher, Guidance, secondary school)

There was recognition that this was not always an attempt by these pupils to be purposefully disruptive, but was perceived by this teacher as 'normal' behaviour for gypsy-travellers:

The boys had no real knowledge of how to behave in a large group ... sorry, how we expect them to behave, and would sit and talk, shout out, refuse to do any work, walk around the place.... I feel that in the case of the traveller boys, they were just behaving normally to them. (Principal teacher, Guidance, secondary school)

Of course, some teachers would be better able to interact with and accommodate this behaviour than others. This was acknowledged by some interviewees about other teachers who were keen to have their class in a routine, and were perhaps less flexible than other colleagues. The teacher in the above quote had taken time to reflect on these gypsy-travellers' behaviour and felt that the reason for it was less to do with intentional
misbehaviour, rather it was related to not knowing how to behave 'properly' in accordance with sedentary perceptions. It was also noted by some teachers that gypsy-traveller pupils had a more adult way of speaking with adults than their sedentary peers, and that this may be interpreted by some teachers as 'cheeky' or behaviourally inappropriate. This lack of reflection on the part of some teachers in trying to understand behavioural issues is also noted by Cullen et al.'s (1996) research on disciplinary exclusion. They found that teachers were not always able to reflect on the underlying reasons for a pupil's behaviour and this could contribute to the use of disciplinary exclusion. 'It was clear that the use of exclusion was encouraged by an unwillingness to consider why a pupil misbehaved in school' (Cullen et al. 1996; 14).

The 'difference' leading to 'deviance' outlined in the title can clearly be mapped in relation to the behaviour of gypsy-traveller pupils. Perceptions of 'difficult' behaviour are embedded in exclusionary processes, and 'difference' is at the heart of perceptions about 'difficult' behaviour and the inability by many schools to accommodate the diversity of pupils' cultures. It should also be noted that many gypsy-traveller pupils do not wish to be accommodated (particularly at the secondary level) and schools very often do not have the time or resources to understand and investigate further how they can make school more relevant and accessible to this group.

Related to issues of behaviour (and another strand which indicates the power of normalizing practices in the classroom) is the difference for gypsy-travellers between physically operating in a culture which spends much of the day outside and the 'insideness' of mainstream education. This was commented on by a group of traveller support teachers who had observed gypsy-traveller pupils in P1 starting school in October, when the rest of the class had begun in August. One interviewee noted that to those children beginning later in the year it may have appeared that there was no obvious structure in the class. However, generally speaking, each child knew what they were supposed to be doing, how they were supposed to operate:

I think some classroom environment ... each individual child kind of knows what they're meant to be doing, but to an outsider it could appear to be adrift, for a boy who's not been used to the way that that class works. And it's when you finish that job it can be seen that, oh well, you just wander round and you do a bit of what you fancy. (traveller support teacher)

I think the thing at the P1 level with the behaviour is that it's just such a culture shock for the child.... (traveller support teacher)

Schools' ability to function is contingent on pupils learning how to operate in class, and importantly, knowing when they transgress behavioural boundaries. As Booth (1995) has argued, 'The way schools construe authority sets the context for understanding disobedience and departures from norms of behaviour'. This both suggests not only the power that teachers have over pupils (the reference to 'disobedience'), but also the 'productive power' that produces pupils to adhere to norms of behaviour, for example, where pupils learn to do automatically certain things without being asked or told (if they do not, they may be perceived as having special needs, social/emotional behavioural difficulties or behavioural problems). When children come into class and do not operate in this way it is often perceived as disruptive to the class. This can happen whether behaviour is purposefully disruptive (attempts to transgress behavioural boundaries) or inadvertently disruptive, for example when, gypsy-travellers either misread the cultural signals of mainstream education, or do not 'see' them (of course, they may choose like other children to transgress these boundaries). Once again, we would argue that where teachers do not reflect on the behaviour of traveller pupils and the reasons underlying it, this becomes a 'devaluation' of gypsy-traveller pupils and contributes to exclusionary processes which in some cases leads to disciplinary exclusion.
FURTHER EXCLUSIONARY PROCESSES

The 'normal' education desired and expected by the majority of the sedentary population does not necessarily match what is considered desirable in Scottish and other gypsy-traveller communities. Ability and attainment have a different focus. They may perceive the family as the main site in which their children are educated; education takes place through 'immersion in the family, personal experience, encouragement of initiative and exploration' (Lee and Warren 1991: 317).

Travelling people learn their own different things but when you're at school you learn different things altogether ... when I grow up I just want to be here wi' my mither and that, and my brothers. (Young woman, gypsy-traveller)

The values of mainstream education in terms of what the majority of the sedentary population perceive education to 'be' can clash quite significantly with gypsy-traveller education. Most gypsy-traveller parents want their children to attend primary school in order to learn reading and writing (Jordan 1995, SCF 1996). For many, this is considered sufficient. In short, it provides adequate tools to engage with the sedentary population for economic purposes. The transition to secondary school would appear somewhat more problematic. This was in evidence in our research; by the time pupils reached the second and third years of secondary school there were high levels of non-attendance, particularly for boys (this is the age at which boys tend to begin working for the family business). Gender is an important dimension in our understanding of the school experiences of Scottish gypsy-traveller children and the perceptions of their teachers. (This will be discussed in more detail in a forthcoming paper.) One underlying factor, according to the literature and suggested by our research, why these pupils stay away from school is that gypsy-travellers may not make the same link between academic success and status as the sedentary population (Lee and Warren 1991, Liegeois 1994, Kenny 1997).

Status is ascribed based on age, gender and place in gypsy-traveller cultures; there would appear to be little connection between academic success and status. In stark contrast, mainstream education places much emphasis on academic attainment and success (and this would be at the heart of many pupils feelings of exclusion from school, not only gypsy-travellers). Booth (1996) has argued that the most pervasive exclusionary processes in school are the 'devaluations of pupils according to their relative attainment.'

Not only is the family the place in which education takes place, mainstream schooling is often perceived as dangerous and in opposition to Gypsy-Traveller lifestyle: School, as an external element, and one which affects children's upbringing, is disturbing by nature, since it upsets the internal education process. Those parents who experienced it themselves generally have negative memories of it, and hesitate to entrust their children to it. (Liegeois, 1994)

We are not like you, we do not let our girls go to discos, parties and have boyfriends. (mother, gypsy-traveller, talking to settled interviewer)

I remember Mr M [gypsy-traveller parent] saying 'The school brutalises children', that was a view, an interesting view, considering his children brutalised a lot of other children. (special education teacher, secondary school)

Our interviews with children and young people and their parents suggest a sustained experience of name-calling and harassment which many felt was not addressed by the schools. Sometimes a sympathetic teacher would support them but often they felt that the scale of bullying was underestimated by the school.
My two wee cousins, C ... and J ..., they are getting bullied by a load of boys just at the moment and they're feared to go to school. Their guidance teacher, every time they tell their guidance teacher, they don't do anything about it! (young woman, gypsy-traveller)

This was a feature of the memories of some parents. One family who had chosen to educate their children themselves said that this was the result of name-calling and because of the parents' own distressing experiences of school. The father had to eat his school dinner only with cutlery with special identifying rubber bands. One Guidance teacher when asked about the relationships between the children from the gypsy-traveller site and the other pupils replied:

Poor. Two reasons: firstly they kept themselves to themselves, they don't naturally mix - this is girls and boys; secondly because of the background they come from, they do at times come up smelling or dirty etc, they get called tinky or blacko.... To this they would very rarely react violently they would come and complain and would use this as an excuse for not coming to school for the next three weeks.

Another guidance teacher in a rural school dismisses a gypsy-traveller mother's fears of dishonesty at school and accepts that if children are different they will get picked on.

I think she has the impression - and probably the kid has the impression too - that the travelling people are a close knit, very caring, very honest people - according to her. Here his bag was stolen but again it was one of those bullying things if you like, where his bag gets stolen and gets thrown away.... I think he gets on fine but he is a bit smelly at times, a wee bit scruffy, he has an English accent so he is different and he will be picked on from time to time. Not because he is a traveller but because he's different.

The special education class teacher in the same school talked of two girls who 'had no problems mixing. They were very acceptable, they were nicely dressed, they turned up nice, they didn't make themselves different in any way'. So sometimes school staff implied that the gypsy-traveller pupils had an obligation to minimize the difference and that if they did not then name-calling was an inevitable response.

CONCLUSION

If gypsy-travellers see mainstream education as largely irrelevant to their lifestyle, their very opposition to it reaffirms their gypsy-traveller identity. While resisting mainstream education and the danger it imposes to their culture, gypsy-travellers reaffirm their identity, but their exclusion is reinforced. This exclusion 'connects' and is reproduced by the inability of many schools to recognize and accommodate gypsy-traveller values and lifestyle as has been noted above. We see the 'power' of schools (power as productive of mainstream culture) in their inability as institutions to include diverse populations. This apparent inability to include continually marginalizes many gypsy-traveller pupils, despite the good intentions of many individual schools and teachers, and can foster conflict between pupils and between pupils and their teachers.

REFERENCES


