'Including Gypsy Travellers in education'

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Looking at the educational exclusion and inclusion of Traveller pupils raises questions about the continued failure of some schools and some teachers to reflect on their response to the participation in school of children and young people from ethnic minority groups. Difference can still be too easily interpreted in schools as deviance, particularly when the differences challenge ideas of 'normality' in school behaviour and attendance, as this study of Gypsy Travellers confirmed.

GYPSY TRAVELLERS IN BRITAIN

Educational discussion of the position of Travellers in Britain often founders on certain mistaken assumptions about racial and ethnic distinctiveness, for instance as Jack Straw did when Home Secretary, when he revealed dangerously racist notions of pure or 'real Gypsies and Romanies'. Just as any other group in Britain, Gypsy Traveller groups have complex and diverse origins. Their culture is permeable, redefined and negotiated through contact with both settled and other Traveller groups and in particular geographic and social contexts (Reid, 1997).

Liegeois, writing of Roma and European Traveller groups, points out that

All attempts to rank groups are racialist and neither ethnically valid or sociologically useful. Gypsies/Travellers comprise a mosaic of groups with a variety of cultural profiles, with shifting internal boundaries of varying force .(Liegeois, 1994:61)

'Cant', the historic language of Scottish Gypsy Travellers, who were often called Tinkers or Tinklers as well as Gypsies, shows their complex origins in the inclusion of words common to Romani and to Shelta, the language of Irish Travellers, as well as Scots, Gaelic and English. In recognising the ethnic distinctiveness and also the shared cultural traditions of Traveller groups, we also may need to acknowledge the further dimensions of gender, social class, nationality or colour (Barot et al, 1999).

Gypsy Travellers are recognised in law as an ethnic group in England and Wales although not in Scotland, where the recent Parliamentary Inquiry heard different views from Traveller organisations and consequently finally recommended that Gypsy Travellers should be included as a separate ethnic group for systematic ethnic monitoring, for example 'of education services to measure progress in meeting targets, for the educational inclusion of Gypsy Traveller children and improvements in their educational attainment. Performance indicators for school inspections should include specific reference to Gypsy Travellers.' (Scottish Parliament, 2001).

British Gypsy Travellers retain a strong oral culture and traditions of self-employment, Some are mobile still, others are housed but have a commitment to a travelling life:

We have a traditional culture, our own beliefs and language - we are proud of this, it has survived for generations, being passed on from family to family. At the heart of our culture is a nomadic lifestyle. Sometimes people say 'how can you be a Traveller (or a Gypsy) if you've been in a house (or on a site) for years?', but for us 'travelling' is not just physically moving, it is a state of mind, we often say 'it's in our blood'. There is much more to being a Traveller than just moving. (Written evidence submitted by Nadia Foy to the Scottish Parliament Inquiry, 2001)

Gypsy Traveller families experience a range of pressures. Changing economic patterns have led to a reduction in traditional work. Poverty and ill-health are much more prevalent amongst Gypsy Travellers than the settled population. Travellers have a significantly lower life expectancy, more accidents, health problems and suicides. The Inquiry by the Scottish Parliament found that

Continuity of care, low rates of immunisation, transfer of records, lack of access to health education and school based health programmes were identified as key issues in the provision of health care services ... Institutional discrimination was identified in health service provision, with examples of poor staff attitudes, GP practices refusing to register Gypsy Travellers and refusal of treatment (Scottish Parliament, 2001).

This Inquiry in Scotland also identified many issues about housing and trailer sites. The latter are often found

... on the outskirts of towns or in remote rural areas, away from shops, schools and other services and with poor access to public transport. Proximity to landfill sites, electricity sub-stations and power lines, railway stations and commercial and industrial premises raised particular concerns about the impact on the health of residents. (Scottish Parliament, 2001)

One site visited as part of the research discussed in this article was behind a landfill refuse tip, and had no public transport. Taxi drivers often refused to take people there. The driver of our taxi was willing to go but expressed a view that the Travellers should be forced to move out of the town. Strongly prejudiced attitudes persist, based in old stereotypes. The power of much prejudice and violence is underpinned by folk tales and stories. The American Romani writer Hancock quotes a survey in the New York Times of attitudes towards 58 different ethnic groups in the USA that found gypsies to be perceived as 'the most undesirable'. Gypsies are thieves; Gypsies steal babies; Gypsies can't be trusted; Gypsies are musical. He remarks: 'In a population of over a million American gypsies it is ridiculous to think of everyone as a thief as it is to think that all are gifted violinists' (Hancock, 1997).

Gypsy Travellers have no tradition of school attendance. Although increasing numbers may attend and see the value of primary school, secondary school can often be viewed as pointless or - worse - as corrupting or dangerous to the safety of Traveller young people.

TRAVELLERS AND EXCLUSION FROM SCHOOL

Our research was undertaken because of increasing concerns about the disciplinary exclusion from school of Traveller pupils (Ofsted, 1996, Lloyd et al, 1999). The project set out to explore how some schools in Scotland respond to the culture of Traveller pupils, and how this might contribute to a view of their actions as disruptive, leading to exclusion. We interviewed some managers, learning support and pastoral care staff in schools, (31 staff); Traveller Support teachers (15); Gypsy Traveller young people (18) and some parents (7). We also interviewed six young Occupational (Show) Travellers and some parents (10).

There was evidence that Gypsy Travellers are likely to be at greater risk of disciplinary exclusion than other pupils and that this contributed to, and was connected with, wider patterns of social exclusion. Teachers were often unwilling to see this wider dimension, tending to view disciplinary exclusion as an individual matter of 'behaviour'. Of course behavioural difficulties are always subjectively constructed and depend on some view of acceptable or 'normal' behaviour. This varies between schools and among individual teachers.

However, research has shown irrefutably that some groups of pupils are disproportionately represented amongst those excluded from school. As well as Gypsy Travellers they include African Caribbean boys; pupils with special educational needs; those receiving free schools meals; looked after children. However

there is also now real evidence that the ethos, pastoral care and educational ideology of the school attended makes a real difference to patterns of exclusion. Schools do make a difference (Munn et al, 2000, Cooper et al, 2000).

For schools to make a difference it seemed that they needed to examine their own cultures. One Traveller Support teacher said that 'teachers in schools are not aware of their own culture, they are all dying to be told about Travellers' culture but they are not aware that this is a system that they operate in ... you have to have a close introspective look at the culture you are creating within a school'.

School staff varied in their acknowledgement of difference in relation to Gypsy Traveller pupils, some expressing the view that all pupils should be treated the same and therefore denying difference, others interested in and acknowledging Traveller culture. Some teachers implied that it was the responsibility of Traveller pupils to fit in, approving of pupils who did so:

They were very acceptable, they were nicely dressed, they turned up nice, they didn't make themselves different in any way ... they were actually very clean and tidy ... they didn't make themselves out to be Tinker girls ... their hair was nice and what not. (Special education teacher, secondary school)

The implication is that difference will naturally cause problems:

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 will be picked on from time to time. Not because he is a Traveller but because he's different. (Guidance teacher, secondary school)

School staff were oblivious to the extent of name-calling experienced by all the Gypsy and also by the Show Traveller young people. Blyth and Milner have written about the ways in which discipline in school is negotiated between teachers and pupils and how this negotiation becomes more complex for certain children, particularly those from ethnic minority groups (Blyth and Milner, 1996).

It was clear that some pupils found school very hard to negotiate. Pupils would come to school unfamiliar with the physical insideness of school and also with the unspoken requirement of visible inequality in pupil/teacher relationships. In particular a familiar, equal style of communication was considered by some teachers to be 'cheeky' or disruptive. Discipline was seen to require visible deference. Some teachers felt that Gypsy Traveller pupils have too great a 'sense of justice', and that this got them into trouble at school:

The boy that was with us lasted till about the end of third year then he just couldn't cope any more. ... Now for him to conform in a mainstream situation was very difficult for him, he was bright, he was cheeky, he had to be disciplined. He had a real sense of justice if he thought something was wrong. He had his own values if he thought someone was being unfairly treated. (Secondary teacher)

A Traveller support teacher argued that Travellers had not learned the 'social dishonesty' expected in the settled community.

NAME-CALLING AND HARASSMENT

Traveller pupils we interviewed expressed a strong commitment to supporting and protecting each other, especially at school, and particularly in relation to name-calling and harassment. All the young people interviewed, including the Show Traveller pupils who otherwise faced fewer difficulties at school, reported encountering constant verbal abuse and harassment at school. The school staff we interviewed appeared

unaware of the scale of this abuse. Young people felt that this was an issue they had to face by themselves, that teachers tended not to believe them or that when they did this sometimes made things worse. Many of the parents were virtually resigned to the situation and expected their children to defend themselves when necessary. Several young people had been excluded as a result of fighting in retaliation to being called names.

BALANCING HOME AND SCHOOL

Some of the parents interviewed wished to protect their young people from the 'worst excesses' of contemporary life and felt that secondary school promoted these excesses, referring to sex education and access to popular knowledge of drugs. Young women were seen to be particularly at risk. 'We are not like you. We do not let our girls go to discos, parties and have boyfriends', they told us. Few of the Gypsy Traveller parents had themselves had positive experiences of school and some lacked the literacy skills to read communications from the school or to help with homework. One parent described how her daughter would get into trouble for not doing her homework, when no-one was able to help her:

There was nobody who was educated enough to help her do the homework, so she would get extra lines because she couldn't do the homework, so it just kept building up until - there was an atmosphere that was unbelievable.

Young people were faced with the constant task of negotiating the values and norms of home and school. School staff often lacked any real sense of the important features of their lives. The interest they showed in Gypsy Traveller cultures often focused on the more exotic or historic aspect of their lives rather than in those which impacted on how the young people did at school. One secondary school teacher talked of building a 'bender' to show how Travellers used to live. The Gypsy Travellers in his school lived in the site described earlier, near the rubbish dump. Poverty, poor housing and health problems were not often mentioned by schools. One Gypsy Traveller mother described how, when she was asked to talk to her child's class, she was expected to tell of her exotic life and how, as a joke, she consequently said that 'we eat hedgehogs', before explaining that although she lived in a trailer she had 'light bulbs and a telly and all that'.

Some of the Traveller pupils we interviewed wished not to be known as Travellers in school. Most, however, wished that their teachers knew something of their lives and understood some of the pressures they faced.

ISSUES RAISED

This study raised a number of key issues to do with how schools respond to difference. The first was the tendency of some school staff to argue still that difference doesn't matter, indeed that treating pupils equitably means ignoring difference. Pupils were valued if they assumed the responsibility to 'integrate', if they didn't 'stand out'. This was likely to lead to situations where difference was understood as disruptive, where actions were interpreted in ways that led to conflict. Where difference was recognised, however, it was sometimes in an 'exoticised' way, rather than as an accurate reflection of the current complexities of the circumstances of Gypsy Travellers in Scotland.

A second key issue was the failure of schools to acknowledge the scale of name-calling and harassment experienced by Traveller pupils and the relationship of this to disciplinary exclusion for fighting. The name-calling reflected wider prejudices about Travellers in the neighbourhoods and raised questions about the responsibility of schools to be aware of this and to be associated with initiatives to address it. The Scottish parliamentary committee

... noted evidence of the hostility of the settled community towards Gypsy Travellers, lack of awareness of lifestyle and culture and discrimination in public services provision, by individuals and institutionally. There was a need for an anti-racism campaign and other initiatives to promote good relations between public services providers, the settled community and Gypsy Travellers. (Scottish Parliament, 2001)

Schools often saw difficulties as belonging to the young people themselves. Instead of examining their institutional practices, they individualised them, rather than seeing the problem as located in the wider society. Some school staff were unwilling to explore the contribution of the ethos and culture of the school to issues of exclusion and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Traveller groups in UK schools continue to become more diverse, with more Roma pupils arriving from Eastern Europe, where continuing prejudice and harassment echoes the recent histories of forced settlement, high levels of persecution and disproportionate, inappropriate placement of Roma pupils in special schools It is increasingly important to discuss and address the role of schools in wider exclusionary processes. There is a paradox in work being done to promote school attendance by Travellers, only for them to be excluded. Disciplinary exclusion can clearly be seen here to be connected with wider processes of social exclusion.

It is important for schools to explore the meanings of difference, and to recognise how difference can become deviance. Equally, they need to recognise and acknowledge the dilemmas for those Gypsy Travellers who may see their culture threatened or devalued by schooling. They need to support individual young people who have difficulties in school but recognise that their difficulties are rooted in wider social and cultural issues that lie within and beyond the school.

We write this as 'settled' academics, who have researched issues of educational exclusion and inclusion. We recognise the limitations of our position and wish to argue strongly that the experts in the life, culture and history of Gypsy Travellers are the Travellers themselves. The key approach for schools is to recognise this, and make a conscious effort to acknowledge the realities of their pupils' lives - to make time to listen and to respond clearly and with justice to what they hear.

Schools have formal responsibilities to provide education free from discrimination and harassment. The research discussed here suggests that in some schools this is far from the case.

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