Every Child Matters? – An investigation into the issues surrounding the inclusion of Gypsy and Traveller children into mainstream education in one Local Authority in the South West of England

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It is widely accepted that Gypsy and Traveller pupils are the most at risk group in education today. This piece discusses the services available to nomadic children and explores the barriers to a successful mainstream education that Traveller communities may face. I investigate the reasons as to why Traveller parents continue to be wary of mainstream educational settings and find that continued ‘respectable’ racism plays a part in their choices. At a time when popularity for extreme far right political parties is flourishing, I argue that in order for Gypsy and Traveller families to receive acceptance within education, they firstly need to be accepted into wider society. By interviewing a Traveller Education Service (TES) Officer, Travelling Showman parent, Romany Gypsy and Traveller Teacher I evaluate the importance of the Traveller Education Services in breaking down barriers not only between schools and families, but between Gypsy and Traveller communities and society on the whole. I conclude that the TES provide an invaluable service for nomadic communities but that problems regarding self ascription and racism continue to shut Gypsy and Traveller communities out from the British education system.

Keywords: Gypsy Travellers, Education, Inclusion, Racism, Support Services.

Introduction

I remember when I was tiny, perhaps five or six, and my family and I were on holiday. We were walking down a sun dappled lane when we came across a Gypsy wagon. It was beautiful – a technicolour vision. Being so young and so inquisitive, I had to investigate further. I was met with real friendliness and was shown around the wagon, which was as beautiful inside as it was out. It was like stepping back in time. I didn’t want to leave; I wanted to live like that family. I wanted to pull onto verges under the shady branches of blossom trees. I’d had a taste of Traveller life, and I was hooked.
Last year my interest in Traveller life grew further. I stumbled upon a programme entitled ‘New Age Travellers’ which documented the lives of a group of Romany Gypsies. The programme illuminated for me the existence of groups of people who seem to live on the periphery of society even though their traditional cultures have been established in Britain for centuries. Some of the families interviewed were asked about schooling and their views on the education system.

I felt I wanted to examine this more, knowing that attendance rates in schools for Gypsy and Traveller pupils are very low. I was moved by the story the family had to tell and felt that I would like to delve a little deeper into the views and attitudes of Gypsy and Traveller families in the hopes that I could perhaps change people’s views of Traveller communities.

My aims for the research project were to investigate current educational provision for Gypsy and Traveller children and their families to find out about the problems and successes regarding inclusion within educational settings. I aimed to explore the reasons as to why some families choose not to use mainstream education and I also wanted to investigate the role of the TES (Traveller Education Service).

It is apparent that there is not a ‘one size fits all’ solution for the education of Gypsy and Traveller pupils. Just as ‘Gauje’ families experience problems with the education system so too do Gypsy/Traveller families.

On approaching this project my main areas of interest led to the following research questions:

- Does racism play a part in parental choice regarding mainstream education?
- What is the reality of the level of support offered to Gypsy/Traveller families by the TES in my chosen area?
- What is the role of schools, and are they adapting to become fully inclusive and welcoming communities for Gypsy/Traveller families?

The intention of the study is to help raise awareness not only of the education of Gypsy and Traveller pupils, but also their presence in society generally.

**Review of Existing Literature**

It is widely recognised that Gypsy and Traveller pupils are the groups most at risk within the education system (Ofsted, 1999). This view has been reiterated with the publication of *Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Gypsy Traveller Pupils* (DfES, 2003) in which it was noted that there still remains ‘racism and discrimination, myths [and] stereotyping’ (p.3) with regards to both Gypsy/Travellers on the whole and within education.

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1. ‘Gauje’ or ‘Gorgio’ meaning ‘non-Gypsy’ in Romani language.
2. Throughout my research I will be using Lloyd and McCluskey’s term ‘Gypsy/Traveller’ to encompass the true diversity of nomadic life. This is to include:
   - English Gypsies (Romanichals)
   - Irish/Scottish/Welsh Travellers (Minceirs, Tinklers and Kale)
   - Fairground or Show people
   - Circus people
   - Romany Gypsy refugees and asylum seekers
   - New Travellers
   - Bargee and water craft Travellers
   - Others, such as migratory seasonal workers. (Tyler, 2005 p.x)
The Obstacle to Education Created by Racism

‘Ordinary, innocent people – hard-working, normal, straightforward people who live around Bracknell – want to get on with their lives in peace, but they want protection under the law when they are invaded by this scum. They are scum, and I use this word advisedly. People who do what these people have done do not deserve the same human rights as my decent constituents going about their everyday lives’

(Mackay, 2002)

This comment was made by the Rt. Honourable Andrew Mackay (MP for Bracknell) regarding the arrival of a group of Travellers to his constituency. This statement demonstrates one of the main reasons as to why I believe this project to be so valuable. There is an important link between Mackay’s comments and the current situation for Gypsy/Travellers in the British education system. Mackay’s view echoes those that the DfES note as being barriers to education. These highly emotive and racist opinions are widespread throughout society and through informal conversations (as well as academic and political research) they have come up time and time again:

‘There are relatively few real Romany Gypsies left, who seem to mind their own business and don’t cause trouble to other people, and then there are a lot more people who masquerade as Travellers or Gypsies, who trade on the sentiment of people, but who seem to think because they label themselves as Travellers that therefore they’ve got licence to commit crimes and act in an unlawful way that other people don’t have.’

(Straw, 1999)

If these are the opinions of government policy makers (Mackay also being the Senior Parliamentary and Political Adviser to David Cameron as Leader of the Opposition) then it is little wonder that these views still infiltrate society through all levels. The expression of such views suggests that there still exists what Phillips (2004) describes as a ‘respectable’ form of racism with regards to Gypsies and Traveller families. An important question for this research was to discover how this racism, whether intentional or otherwise, has affected the drafting and implementation of legislation relating to the inclusion of Gypsy/Traveller children in the British education system.

Fears Surrounding Self Ascription

As a result of racial discrimination, one of the barriers to education can be the reluctance to ‘self-identify’ as pointed out by Lloyd & McCluskey (2008, p.336). Reliable statistics on the numbers of Gypsy/Travellers in the UK today are difficult to locate, which is a huge problem when it comes to identifying the number of children either in, or out of school. Kenrick & Clark estimate the number of Gypsies/Travellers living in the UK to be 120,000 (1999, p.10) whereas The Travellers Times Online Blog suggests a more accurate figure to be around 300,000 stating that ‘If all of Britain’s Gypsies and Travellers gathered in one place, we’d take up a city the size of Cardiff, Nottingham or Belfast’ (TT, 2009). Researchers may be viewed with understandable suspicion by those they wish to study, which may explain the disparity between these figures. Kenrick & Clark would have experienced reluctance from Gypsy/Travellers to identify and thus I suspect the figures released by The Travellers Times to be more accurate, as this is a longstanding media organisation working for (and run by)
Travellers in the UK. This vast difference in numbers goes to prove how unreliable the data currently is.

Ten years ago Ofsted stated that ‘it is a priority to improve the level and accuracy of reporting by Travellers of their ethnicity so that more realistic and precise data are available’ (1999, p.5). Having searched for accurate data it is my experience that different services appear to be working with different figures. - The Department for Children, Schools and Families have omitted several groups of Gypsy/Travellers from The School Census including Travelling Showmen, Circus Travellers, New Age and Bargee (water dwelling) Travellers (2008, p.10). This contradicts the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) which recognises the diversity between Gypsy/Traveller cultures. Whilst some families will readily identify as being descendant from traditional Gypsy/Traveller ethnicity, due to fear of reprisal and discrimination many Gypsies/Travellers choose to keep their ethnicity to themselves. Preferring instead to become integrated with their ‘host society” they become ‘invisible” to other groups of nomads, government bodies and society itself (Lee, 1993, p.123). Thrupp and Tomlinson agree that there is a ‘problem of giving recognition to minority cultures [...] without accentuating social divisions’ (2005, p.550). For those who do self-ascribe there is the confusion which still surrounds the traditional and/or modern stereotypes of Gypsy/Travellers. This means that people working in areas relevant to nomadic communities but not specifically on behalf of such groups (such as Planning Officers, Welfare Officers etc.) do not realise the diversity of such communities; in fact this could be said of society on the whole. It is unlikely that this is an overt form of racism, but more likely a lack of knowledge and understanding.

School Attendance and Exclusion

Education is becoming more important to Gypsy/Traveller families on the whole (Bhopal, 2004) and with this a struggle emerges between their traditional pasts and their possible futures regarding both lifestyle and career. This puts parents in a difficult position when it comes to deciding what kind of educational provision they would like their children to receive. Parker-Jenkins & Hartas suggest that ‘there are an estimated 50,000 travelling school-age children in England attending 3,400 schools’ (2002, p.40). Ofsted states that ‘the average attendance rate for Traveller pupils is around 75%’ (2003, p.5). This leaves a large amount of children unaccounted for. Save the Children estimate that the number of school age Traveller children not attending school in the UK is about 10,000 (2001, p.244) which by Ofsted’s reckoning should be more like 12,000 (2003, p.9). Both organisations readily admit that their figures are probably a massive underestimate.

Ofsted (2003, p.12) found that in the majority of local authorities (LAs) it was reported that home schooling was on the increase. There is no national data available to show the exact numbers of Gypsy/Traveller children being taught in the home, so I am unable to reach more of a solid conclusion about how many children are missing from the education system completely. Of those being educated at home, Ofsted found that most were of secondary school age (2003, p.12). The report is limited, as it does not evaluate the effectiveness of the education taking place in the home which is unhelpful when trying to research the educational provision for all Gypsy/Traveller children. Parker-Jenkins and Hartas (2002) argue that when it is not monitored by a Traveller Teacher or TES Officer, home education can be more of a negative experience than a positive. They believe that this is due to a historical reluctance in using mainstream education which has in turn led to inadequately educated parents increasing the gaps between Gypsy/Traveller education and the general rise of educational standards in society.
At secondary level, there is a substantial drop in attendance for Gypsy/Traveller pupils. Derrington & Kendall estimate that only 1 in 5 Gypsy/Traveller children are enrolled in secondary schools in England (2003, p.5). The reasons for this seem to be a mix of heightened awareness of racial differences that come along with adolescence, and Gypsy/Traveller families’ struggle to balance an appropriate curriculum whilst keeping their nomadic traditions in existence. Bhopal identifies that whilst there has been a general re-appraisal with regards to futures and careers within Gypsy/Traveller communities, this creates moral dilemmas on the part of the parents. Although she found that families value an education for their children, they also fear the loss of their traditional nomadic cultures which an acceptance of secondary and higher education could bring with it (2004, p.62). With the importance of a full secondary education increasing for Gypsy/Traveller families on the whole, there will always be those families who do not wish their children to be educated past the point of basic literacy and numeracy. Okley strongly argues that ‘entry into mainstream education represents assimilation and such participation is and should be resisted by the Gypsy Traveller community’ (In Bhopal, 2004, p.51). This illustrates the difficulties faced by Gypsy/Traveller parents, and the varying opinions which inform their decision making. Clay responds to this dilemma by asserting that continued positive communication between Gypsy/Traveller families throughout their educational experience will lead to a fruitful balance between keeping their cultural diversity and achieving successful learning outcomes:

‘Where Traveller identity and culture is respected it is self-evident that attendance will continue to improve’.  

(In Acton & Mundy, 1997, p.77)

Exclusion from school settings (whether ‘dropping out’ or being excluded by the school) can be the result of racial tension and bullying. This bullying is not necessarily carried out by other children but may be the result of the class teachers’ prejudices against Gypsy/Traveller communities. Save the Children (2001), Bhopal (2004) and the DCSF (2008) all recognise that racial discrimination can initially stem from those who we would assume were adhering to the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) such as teachers and heads of school. A further amendment in 2001 imposed a statutory duty on over 43,000 public authorities (including schools) to ‘eliminate unlawful racial discrimination; promote equality of opportunity; and promote good relations between people of different racial groups’ (DCSF, 2008, p.30). Of course there will always be an element of peer bullying in school as agreed by Save the Children (2001), Naylor (1993) and Ivatts (2005) but there is no definitive research in this area which tackles the issue and moves research forward.

Local Authorities and the Traveller Education Services

It is the responsibility of the local authorities to provide all school age children with mainstream school places and thus they operate by their own jurisdiction. The TES also differs greatly across the authorities with some LAs not having their own Traveller-based services at all. Beckett (2005) believes that the TES are the ‘key players’ to the successful education of Gypsy/Traveller children and states that their work ‘has enabled continuity by putting policy into practice, within a framework of human rights, race equality and equal opportunities’ (In Tyler, 2005, p.33). This, she says, takes place at both the micro and macro levels of policy and practice; from placement of the child and support for the family through to national and international policy levels. From her research with Gypsy/Traveller families Bhopal (2004) found that all of her participants valued the help and support of their TES, and
that having their input improved communication between parents and schools. However, as Save the Children (2001) point out, not all areas of the UK have their own TES and this is determined by the availability of local funding. Lloyd & McCluskey (2004) also see the support available as varying greatly. The non-uniform nature of the service acts as a barrier to those families living in areas without a TES who will be placed by LAs that do not have the specialist staff or training to provide an on-going support system for children, families, schools and teachers. It is in these areas where most confusion arises about the numbers of children both in residence and in educational settings.

Save the Children describe the TES as being an ‘alerting service’ (2001, p.227), which in the case of Gypsy/Traveller children is invaluable to have between organisations such as land agencies, LAs, TES and Healthcare providers. – Simply put, they make other authorities aware of the presence of new Gypsy/Travellers to the area which should ensure that those families are informed of, and entitled to, local services. However, in a subject full of ‘contradictions and significant silences’ (Lloyd & McCluskey, 2008, p.331) this alert can bring with it negative attention from the authorities as well as positive. Ofsted have found that many authorities’ behaviour towards Gypsy/Travellers actually contradicts the principles set out in their public statements of inclusion. This obviously undermines relationships and serves to ‘inhibit the effectiveness of the Traveller Education Services and other agencies’ (2003, p.5). They conclude that levels of coordination differ hugely between authorities (2003, p.9). The TES I will be researching not only place Gypsy/Traveller children and assign them a family/school liaison officer; they also see it as their duty to supply those families with unhindered access to universal services.

Ofsted found that in those areas with their own TES the service was providing ‘at least satisfactory and often very good support for schools, Traveller families and children’ (2003, p.5). However, throughout my research I was not able to locate any data regarding the effectiveness of LAs that do not have a specific TES. Ofsted omit these areas in their reports, instead focusing on areas that do have a dedicated TES. This omission only serves to increase the gaps in provision across the UK and lessens the relevance of government publications relating to this subject, especially in those areas where there are no specific services to implement the guidelines. If these authorities continue to operate without a specialist TES, we could start to see Gypsy/Traveller families moving into areas that do offer that service, putting considerable strain onto the TES, schools and both legal and illegal site provision.

**Ethical Considerations**

‘Without adequate training and supervision, the neophyte researcher can unwittingly become an unguarded projectile bringing turbulence to the field, fostering personal trauma (for researcher and researched), and even causing damage to the discipline’

(Punch, 1994, p.93)

I was very aware of the delicate nature in which my research must be carried out. As my initial literature review uncovered, racism (both overt and covert) is still rife when discussing Gypsy/Travellers and I would not want to be responsible for further fuelling any arguments on that basis.
To avoid any sort of misunderstandings about my project I specifically designed my ethics protocol (see appendix 1) to fully explain my interest and intentions. I made it very clear about the geographical area I was researching in and how the information gained would be used. However, my participants were told that this information would not appear in the final body of work in order to protect the identities of the TES and schools involved.

As I have previously discussed, some of my research involved being out in the field acting as participant observer. The information I gained here is not used to specifically prove any points but is merely be used as a guide – a taster of how the TES operate. This is firstly because I am aware that there will be no ‘typical’ day for a TES officer and secondly because I wish to avoid ‘The Hawthorne Effect’ (Barratt et al, 1999, p.12) whereby those being observed change their normal behaviours to ‘suit’ your research. It would be unhelpful to include any findings which may have been a result of such an effect.

I was privileged enough to gain highly confidential information regarding the numbers of Gypsy/Traveller children currently residing in my research area. Although I have used one figure, I sought advice about the inclusion of this data and will not be including it in my appendices.

**Research Settings**

My research settings varied considerably with Mary as I spent four days with her. Her role as TES Officer means that she is constantly on the road visiting families in their own homes, meeting other council officers or visiting children and teachers in school settings. In all settings I was introduced by Mary and was able to explain my project fully.

When I spent time with Mary and Laura (I interviewed Laura at Elminghurst School) I was aware that I could be perceived as a safety threat and thus my CRB form and University ID card were with me at all times. I signed in and out when visiting schools as was their protocol. My interviews with Olive and Jackie took place within their homes and were much more relaxed. I still carried my University ID card (as I was always aware that I was representing the University) but there was less pressure in these environments and no protocol in particular to follow.

**Methodology**

‘The initial question is not ‘Which methodology’ but ‘What do I need to know and why?’”

(Bell, 2007, p.115)

After much thought I reached the conclusion that my research lay within Cohen et al’s (2007) ‘interpretive’ paradigm. I identified with many of the examples given: ‘The individual… personal involvement of the researcher…micro-concepts…interrogating and critiquing the taken for granted’ (p.42) and felt further drawn into this paradigm for my research. I liked the idea of my research being personally illuminating, and felt that this type of project would be accessible to any prospective readers regardless of their prior knowledge on the subject. Because of my affinity with Cohen et al’s paradigm, I thought that my research would benefit from using qualitative data collection methods.

Oakeshott (1933) describes an ‘arrest of experience’ (p.191) which requires researchers to step outside of their everyday assumptions and beliefs and instead re-examine their own
‘norms’ to find true meaning. I think this type of shift of experience benefited my research and ensured honesty, integrity and a balanced approach. There can be problems that arise from carrying out quite a personal project in that it can be difficult to stay neutral. This was a problem of which I was aware, endeavoured to avoid, yet still managed to experience. Although I found myself being personally drawn into the debates, I still believe that my findings are entirely fair. This is down to the fact that I have taped evidence of all of my interviews.

Although I believe my research benefited from qualitative research methods, I remembered Bell’s (2007) advice and never ruled out the possibility of there being the potential for some use of quantitative data collection to be involved as one of my main objectives was to ascertain the numbers of Gypsy/Travellers living in the area in which my research took place. However, I avoided the need to carry out my own quantitative research by gaining access to confidential figures relating to ascription and population, as discussed previously.

To gain a truly rich and balanced view I needed to find a diverse range of participants for research. It was very difficult to gain access to the Gypsy/Traveller community but eventually (and through my first interviewee, Mary, a Traveller Education Service Officer) I was put in contact with Jackie, a Showman parent (‘Showman’ or ‘Show person’ being the preferred terms to denote the culture of the Fairground and Circus Travellers. See appendix 2). Through word of mouth and ‘friends of friends’ I found Olive and Laura. Olive is a Romany Gypsy and former member of the Romany Gypsy Advisory Group and Laura is Senior TA in literacy at Elminghurst School. I found that once people knew my intentions and knew that I was open minded about my research they were enthusiastic about taking part.

I shadowed Mary from the TES and in this instance my methods altered in that I used more of a ‘participant observation’ method, as mentioned by Cohen et al. (2003), which promotes the ‘live’ gathering of data from ‘live situations’ (p.305). By seeing Mary’s day to day work for myself, I think the experience added realism and context to my research, as I immersed myself into her world. Our regular contact acted to strengthen bonds between us as researcher and subject. As well as shadowing, I also conducted a semi-structured tape-recorded interview with Mary which gave her the opportunity to express her own views on Gypsy/Traveller education. I was aware that interpreting what I saw through observation relied heavily on being able to distinguish and understand the context in which the event took place. Therefore relying solely on participant observation would have been unfair to Mary, the TES and any Gypsy/Travellers I came into contact with through this method. This choice was deliberate, and in response to Walker’s (1985) argument that ‘methods may be an act of faith rather than a rational response to a clearly formulated problem’ (p.87). It would have been unhelpful and unfair, therefore, not to consider the possible outcomes of my methods.

I was able to gain statistics from Mary relating to the numbers of Gypsy/Traveller pupils currently in my geographical research area. This blend of methods known as ‘triangulation’ (Robson, 2002, p.172) allowed me to gain a clear understanding of the data collected and ensured a richness and depth to my study. (This method was not entirely successful, however, as the statistics could not be published in my findings due to data protection issues.) Sikes states that triangulation is an invaluable part of research because ‘multiple perspectives and interpretations are almost inevitable’ (In Opie, 2004, p.15). So again I was reminded of

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3 It should be noted that my interviewees’ names and any settings mentioned are all pseudonyms.
keeping an open mind with regards to changing and adapting my research methods as I went along.

My interviews with Olive (Romany Gypsy), Laura (teacher) and Jackie (Showman parent) were more relaxed and less structured. I think this was because I had calmed my nerves by interviewing Mary first and had relaxed into my role as ‘researcher’. I hoped that my open nature would help to gain the trust of my interviewees enough for them to relax into our conversations which I believe they did.

With all my interviews I endeavoured to remember Patton’s advice that the purpose of interviewing ‘is not to put things in someone’s mind’ (1980, p.196) but to allow them the freedom to express their own, unforced views. Although the interviews were guided to some extent by me, I aimed to take a phenomenological approach, by which I let my interviewees lead the conversation on to other subjects that they saw as being of importance. This helped me to diminish any presuppositions which I may have un/consciously held. It also helped further spread my research, and resulted in my interest in certain areas increasing. The expansion of my original ideas led me to a greater level of understanding as I delved deeper into my research.

In hindsight, I was pleased with my research methods and felt that my project evolved through my becoming acquainted with a wide range of individuals. Their unique viewpoints came together to form a tapestry of thoughts and ideas and have really illuminated not only my research, but my own values.

Findings and Analysis

Analysis of the data gathered through interviews and shadowing of the Traveller Education Services suggested a number of key themes: ‘Self Ascription’, the ‘Key Players’ and ‘Changing Perceptions’. This section reports on each of these themes.

Mary is a Traveller Education Officer, Olive is a Roma Gypsy and former member of the Romany Gypsy Advisory Group, Jackie is a Showman parent and Laura is a Senior TA in Literacy at Elminghurst School.

Self Ascription

As highlighted in the literature review, there is a trend amongst Gypsy/Travellers to avoid self ascription. The interviews revealed that although there definitely is reluctance to ‘be counted’ amongst Gypsy/Traveller communities, there are many reasons as to why the numbers estimated to be living in the UK are so diverse.

Racism is still a huge issue for all groups of Gypsy/Travellers. Jackie (A travelling Showman) believes her family to be the victim of such discrimination from a neighbour, and despite her Showman background they have been labelled by some members of the local community as ‘Gypsy scum’. This experience endorses the argument in the literature review of society’s lack of knowledge of the varying ethnic groups, and also reiterates Thrupp & Tomlinson’s comment that there is a ‘problem of giving recognition to minority cultures... without accentuating social divisions’ (2005, p.550). Mary was also able to give a response on this issue: ‘There are a number of families out there who [...] do not ascribe [...] and for them um [...] it’s to do with racism and fear of the consequences.’ (Interview with Mary, 2009, see appendix 3).
For the Gypsy/Travellers that do wish to self ascribe, the opportunity to do this rarely comes along. Jackie told me a story of when she and her husband had visited the bank to take out a business loan and were asked to choose a business title which best described them. They put forward ‘Showmen’ as they run a successful fairground business, but were told that this was not a valid option. Instead they had to settle on ‘Caterers’. There appears to be a struggle in situations like Jackie’s (she is proud to self ascribe) between the desire to be seen for who she is and the availability of this type of identification. As she says: ‘Well what else can we be?’ (Interview with Jackie, 2009, see appendix 2).

Both Mary and Olive mentioned that one of the reasons for reluctance in self ascription is the vivid memory of the atrocities carried out during WWII. ‘There are no exact statistics on the number of European Gypsies exterminated during the Holocaust. Estimates place the number as high as between 500,000 and 600,000 people, with most of the deaths occurring at Auschwitz’ (Pottanat & Khan, 1997). Mary especially believes that the mass execution of Gypsy/Travellers during this period of time has made them very aware of identification and fearful of the consequences of self ascription: ‘And it is to do with […] fear and it’s to do with racism and if you talk to them about things like the Holocaust […] for them it’s far too recent and the Shinti tribes […] were nearly wiped out […] people don’t pick that up you know.’ (Interview with Mary, 2009, see appendix 3).

With regards to education, I was astonished to find during my initial review that Ofsted omits several culturally nomadic groups from their school census altogether, only allowing Roma and Irish Travellers to ascribe.

At Elminghurst School, Laura explained that the 14 New Age Traveller children on roll had been unaware of their cultural differences until it had been brought up in class, and that most of the children now had an increased sense of pride in themselves and their heritage: ‘It’s helped them create a sense of their own identity.’ (Interview with Laura, 2009, see appendix 4). Although these children are recognised as being Travellers in the school, it must be remembered that they are not considered Travellers by Ofsted or the law even though they do appear in government legislation such as ‘Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Gypsy Traveller Pupils’ (DfES, 2003) and ‘The Inclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children and Young People’ (DCSF, 2008).

A fairer and more accurate account of Gypsy/Travellers living in the UK can only come about through all agencies working to the same protocols. It is misleading to omit certain ethnicities from formal government forms, only to then find that there is no real data on the numbers of those people living in the UK. I was unable to find any more data regarding numbers in the UK, and thus it is probably somewhere between Kenrick & Clark’s suggestion of 120,000 (1999, p.10) and Traveller Times Online Blog estimate of 300,000 (2009). However, I was able to find data on the number of Gypsy/Traveller children within my chosen LA’s operating area. I cannot divulge the break down of ethnic groups (as this would make it possible for the LA to be identified) but I can state that during the period January – March 2009 there were 318 school age children known to be in the area (2009, Source Protected). This number may come as a shock to many people, but it should be remembered that this is the minimum amount of children in the area. It is possible for many Gypsy/Travellers to remain ‘invisible’ (Lee, 1993, p.123) and this is extremely common amongst the housed Gypsy/Traveller community. As Mary and Olive agree, it is very easy to pass yourself off as ‘White British’ on the necessary forms if you have no visual giveaways of your identity such as wagons and horses. You have successfully become ‘normal’.
None of the literature consulted whilst carrying out this research has highlighted just how unreliable the methods of data collection are for the purposes of counting the numbers of Gypsy/Travellers in the UK. From speaking with Mary, Olive and Jackie it has become obvious that whilst the government continues to omit groups of people from various census’ yet carries on publishing papers on ‘inclusion’ and ‘achievement’ for Gypsy/Travellers, there will always be a feeling that they are sending out mixed messages to these ethnic minorities. – We want to include you in some things, but not in others. This imbalance needs to be recognised and dealt with to ensure that all ethnic minority groups living in the UK are given the opportunity to identify, and feel safe and proud to do so.

The ‘Key Players’

When I researched the role of the TES the information I found was highly enthusiastic about the role of the service. Beckett (2005) described how the TES worked hard to put Human Rights policy into practice at both micro and macro levels. I had been disappointed not to be able to find any government legislation which clearly defines the role of the TES, but put this down to the fact that it may be seen as unnecessary to make such information available to the public.

Beckett’s (2005) view of the TES being the most important element to securing education for Gypsy/Traveller children has been reiterated to me time and time again through interviews and through informal conversations with families I have met along the way. The term ‘key players’ seems to be an understatement. Roles ascribed to the TES by families themselves (and more specifically, Mary) have been: ‘friend’, ‘confidante’, ‘informer’, ‘supporter’ and ‘trusted’. The role of the TES is much more than I had ever anticipated which suggests that their role goes well beyond the policy description. Mary had told me that her main role as TES Officer was to make sure that all Gypsy/Traveller children had the same opportunities for education. She joked on several occasions that she was trying to do herself out of a job by successfully passing on all TES responsibility to the schools. It was previously the job of the TES to find school places for Gypsy/Traveller pupils, but since 2003 and the publication of Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Gypsy Traveller Pupils (DfES) the onus has been on schools to manage their own Gypsy/Traveller intake. This is not being carried out in practice and Jackie commented that she didn’t believe that the TES could ever disappear completely. Her view was backed up by Olive, who described the TES as ‘fantastic’ (Interview with Olive, 2009, see appendix 5) and Laura, who saw that they had a clear role acting as support for both schools and families well into the future.

One of the points I had wanted to raise with Mary was about the ‘conflict of interests’ which could exist between the TES and other council departments like Planning and Highways. I reported in my literature review that Ofsted had found evidence that the way in which many authorities treated Gypsy/Travellers contradicted their public statements of inclusion. Mary was hesitant to discuss this issue, but did tell me that county protocol for dealing with new families to the area was nearly always ignored. Certainly in this area there is a race that takes place between the Planning, Highways, Welfare and TES departments. If Mary can get to a family first and place the children into school within 3 days then there is a very strong case for allowing the family to stay on an illegal site. This also applies if Welfare arrives first. However if Planning or Highways reach the family first then they have the jurisdiction to be able to move the family on, regardless of there being any children or educational needs involved.
When Save the Children described the TES as an ‘alerting service’ (2001, p.227) they were describing the protocol that the TES should adhere to (they are required to notify Planning if families are pitched on illegal sites) but in real life, it comes down to empathy and morals:

’There is a county protocol that was drawn up with the police, the county council, district councils, our service, health service um [...] where we’re all supposed to notify each other but of course it isn’t really in the district council’s interest to get us involved if they can get them evicted.’

(Interview with Mary, 2009, see appendix 6).

Because the TES are seen as a trusted organisation who ‘bend the rules’ for Gypsy/Travellers, their role has expanded out beyond its normal boundaries. Mary is called upon to assist families with land issues and writes letters of support (again, to her own employers) from an educational perspective. Since children are required by law to receive education, her input can make the difference between being granted permission or not. She expressed her unease at always being at loggerheads with other council departments, but it is clear that she sees her job as being far more important than the grey areas and protocol which surround it: ‘I would be prepared to lose my job over it’ (Interview with Mary, 2009, see appendix 7). If families are only in the area for a short space of time then it is not required that they attend a local school. However, it is down to Mary’s judgment as to whether or not they receive any intervention from her. She is a trained teacher, and can teach in the home if parents or children express concerns over attending school.

The TES that Mary works for is very free from structure and is able to adapt and offer families a tailor made service. This type of professional responsibility and judgment is not mentioned anywhere in the literature and may be a trend which only occurs within this particular area. The fact that there are no ‘rules’ in place and that Mary is fairly adaptable to the needs of the families serves to benefit the system, and means that she is an approachable and trustworthy figure throughout the Gypsy/Traveller community.

Mary told me a story about a boy who had arrived in the area from another county. She had been notified by his base school that he had told them that he would be continuing his school work whilst away. She followed this up, and found that he was staying with his grandparents and learning how to use machinery in order to become a tree surgeon. He was 15 years old and had little interest in school. After much thought, Mary decided to let the school know that she had witnessed his education, and that she was happy with his personal account. Protocol may say that she should have reported his grandparents for letting a minor use machinery, or for taking him out of compulsory education. Mary’s view was that he was learning a trade which would keep him in work for the rest of his life. – A judgment which shows the sensitivity that her role requires. Plus, by reporting the family it would only serve to exclude them further from the services and he may disappear under the radar. It is stories like this which demonstrate that the job of the TES Officer relies heavily upon deciding what is morally right and wrong. And as Mary and Olive both agree, you really do need the right person in the right job in terms of having empathy and understanding with the Gypsy/Travellers. Their job is not only to serve the educational needs of the children, but they also act to support and guide the whole community; they are a true friend.
Changing Perceptions

All of my interviewees and the families I came into contact with throughout this investigation agreed that education in today’s society is very important for Gypsy/Traveller communities to be able to access. This view backs up Bhopal’s (2004) point that education is increasing in popularity amongst Gypsy/Traveller families. I found that the level of education required by families depends somewhat on their ethnicity and their own personal perceptions of schooling. For example, Jackie has very strong views that her children should go as far through the education system as they desire. Traditionally her family are Showmen, but she recognises that this business has seen a decline in recent years and that they may wish to go into other areas. She also feels very strongly that even if they do choose to keep the fairground going they will still need a good level of education to be able to carry out day to day running of the business.

Both Mary and Olive agreed that the group least likely to use the education system are Roma Gypsies. I discovered that this is due in part to changes that have occurred over time with regards to Gypsies’ traditional sources of income. Olive was particularly saddened by the loss of these jobs (such as peg making, hedge laying and natural medicine) and described how for Gypsies especially, there is a struggle to balance their traditional roles within society with the ever changing technological world. This view is reiterated by Green in Save the Children (2001) who comments that:

‘lots of people who are Travellers say it’s wrong to send the kids to school. They are afraid they will lose their culture. But I knew the travelling way of life was changing and kids would need an education for the future’

(In Save the Children, 2001, p.252)

Green’s quote brings up the question of an appropriate curriculum. All of my interviewees agreed that in order to encourage more use of mainstream schooling amongst the Gypsy/Traveller communities there must be links within the curriculum to their own culture. A fine example of this in practice is to be found at Elmingurst School, where Laura and her team have become involved with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Achievement Programme which is run and funded by the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), NATT (National Association of Teachers of Travellers) and the TES. Laura has 14 New Age Travellers enrolled at her school and therefore the school was asked to become involved in this pilot programme in 2007. Although there are no hard and fast policies that need to be adhered to, the programme is designed to enable teachers of Gypsy/Traveller pupils to bear in mind their cultural heritage and encourage the inclusion of this into the curriculum. In order to make this happen, the school took part in a nationwide poster competition to promote the Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month which takes place every June. This involved all pupils and Laura maintains that this project really benefited all of her pupils by raising awareness of their own individual cultural identities.

Although Elmingurst is a Beacon School for the promotion of Gypsy/Traveller issues, all of my interviewees mentioned that the successful inclusion and education of Gypsy/Traveller pupils relies heavily on having the right person in the right job. At Jackie’s children’s school there was no involvement with the GRTA programme and therefore the teachers had very little information on the lives of Travellers other than their own preconceptions. Jackie had found in the past that her children had been subjected to discrimination at the hands of their teachers. This correlates with information found by Save the Children (2001), Bhopal (2004)
and the DCSF (2008). All of my interviewees agreed that Gypsy/Traveller children were far more likely to receive negative attention from their class teachers than from other pupils in the school. The main theme which emerged from this was that if teachers do not have the necessary information on Gypsy/Traveller lifestyles then they often assume that Travellers neither want nor need education. Therefore they do not push them as hard as others in the class. In particularly, Mary had found this at many of the schools that she works with as TES Officer and stated that this lack of interest in the Gypsy/Traveller pupils creates a cycle whereby the pupils themselves feel that education is of little value to them.

During the literature review I reported that Ofsted (1999) considered Gypsy and Traveller children to be the most at risk group in the education system. This view was partly based on official school attainment such as SATs. During my discussion with Laura it transpired that in actual fact, this type of league table should be null and void with regards to Gypsy/Traveller pupils. Laura stated that because SAT testing is carried out on specific dates, if pupils happen to be travelling on these dates, which is highly likely due to summer festivals, they do not take the tests at all. Therefore the data amassed is missing the results from an unknown quantity of pupils and cannot be regarded as accurate. This revisits the point raised earlier in this chapter about the unreliable methods of counting Gypsy/Traveller children in schools. This coupled with children missing tests only increases the confusion surrounding both numbers and attainment (Interview with Laura, 2009, see appendix 8).

My findings show that there is a definite shift in thought regarding education within the Traveller communities which I have identified through my themes. All of my interviewees expressed enthusiasm for this project and felt that there is a definite need to investigate current educational practices further for the benefit of all children in the UK, and especially those from ethnic minority groups such as Gypsies and Travellers.

**Conclusion**

Through my investigation it became apparent that there are a number of ‘contradictions and significant silences’ (Lloyd & McCluskey, 2008, p.331) with regards to both the effective education of Gypsy/Traveller children and the policy and protocol which surrounds it. These contradictions occur in part because of a lack of general understanding about the varying ethnic groups which constitute the larger heading ‘Gypsy/Traveller’ and the retaliation by those groups caused by large swathes of society having such a blinkered view of what it means to be either a Gypsy or Traveller. I am pleased that my research has highlighted the lack of adherence to protocol which underpins the ability to be able to access services like Healthcare and Education and feel this could be researched further.

As the literature points out, there is an obstacle to education for these groups created by race issues and underlying prejudices which Phillips (2004) noted as being ‘respectable’. But too many people in society seem to believe that this form of discrimination is acceptable; they do not see the families struggle with their identities and societal roles. As Jackie pointed out, sometimes the Gypsies/Travellers do not help themselves and create a bad impression which then tarnishes all groups of Travellers. This needs to be remembered not only by the pockets of society who deal with Travellers day to day such as the TES, schools and other agencies, but by society on the whole. The old saying ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’ has never seemed so fitting.
I was really moved by Mary and her role within the Gypsy/Traveller community. She is seen by them as a friend, a trusted figure who is willing to help them with any matter they bring to her attention. Her role goes much further than getting Gypsy/Traveller pupils into schools. I witnessed her searching for housing for elderly Gypsies, contacting the Health authorities for a family who desperately needed medical attention and above all being a friendly face in an otherwise alien world. I find it very sad that she believes that her job will eventually cease to exist due to a lack of funding and a perceived lack of importance. It has become apparent to me that her role is vitally important to the Gypsy/Traveller community in her LA and that to lose her would mean that the ties that have been forged would cease to exist altogether.

My investigation changed somewhat whilst I was carrying it out; without noticing I had become very focussed on the people I came into contact with rather than some of the issues which I thought would be important to me. But it became apparent very early on that the real issues for the Gypsy/Traveller community were not about receiving the same levels of education as their housed counterparts, but receiving the same levels of respect and fair treatment. Without this, there is little hope of ever successfully including all Gypsy/Traveller children in education.

The education authorities need to bear in mind that there really is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to working with these communities because they do not all share the same cultural beliefs and background; they are a diverse range of people whose lives can offer a rich breadth of knowledge to the school curriculum. I believe that there is a positive shift occurring within school policy for Gypsy/Traveller children, as highlighted in the DCSF (2008) The Inclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children and Young People and that this can only be a step in the right direction. However, by only implementing the GRTA programme into a few schools, there will still be many people working in the field who have no knowledge about the diverse ethnic groups involved. This is further hindered by The School Census and the current law omitting certain groups and prohibiting them from self ascription and identification.

My research has shown that the current education system can offer, and in some LAs does offer a successful education for Gypsy/Traveller families. This was never more apparent than at Elminghurst School, where the GRTA programme was fully implemented. However, this programme currently only runs in a small selection of schools in a few LAs (and only in areas where a TES is present). The successful inclusion of Gypsy/Traveller children cannot begin to happen nationally until this initiative is rolled out into every county.

I believe that my research has been beneficial because it has reiterated the problems of prejudice and racism. I believe that by concentrating too much on fulfilling the political duties which the word ‘inclusion’ brings with it, we are forgetting that before the word became a term so easily dropped without thought, it actually meant something. I feel that my findings and analysis have served to answer the research questions which I set out to investigate, but that my downfall has been that the size of this subject is so far reaching that I could not bring every aspect surrounding it into this body of work. I think my research expresses the importance of identity, tolerance and community as the foundations to any successful education.

‘Although I want to have a good career, I know that some day I will be travelling with my horses through a shady back road ready to stay in a flower-laden meadow.’

(Loveridge, 2004, p.xi)
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*Appendices for this report can be viewed in the Supplementary Files link, located in the Reading Tools list in the window adjacent to this article.*