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Strangers in Strange Places -The Othering of Gypsy and Traveller Children in Educational Spaces

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Background

The poor attendance and underachievement of Gypsy and Traveller children within the UK education system has long been acknowledged as a source of concern (Acton, 2004; DfES 2003, 2005; OfSTED 1996, 1999, 2002, 2003; Save the Children 2000; Liegeois, 1998; Plowden, 1967; Swann, 1985). The UK's experience reflects that of wider international education systems that seek to offer inclusive and compulsory education (UNICEF, 2004). For such communities, contemporary aims and values of education often sit uncomfortably with their own personal belief systems, especially in relation to their desire to be mobile. As a result, many children from Gypsy and Traveller communities are more likely to be misunderstood within schools and perceived as posing a challenge.

This paper will examine inclusionary processes and examples of 'good practice' in two primary and two secondary schools in one inner London borough in the UK. It will specifically explore these experiences in relation to the spatial aspect of the school. Gypsy and Traveller children have unique spatial orientations which are at odds with the spatial construction of the school environment. Part of this investigation will incorporate an examination of the discourses within educational policy. Specifically, we will consider the way in which by setting up the structured 'spaces' within schools, the implications of such policy frames continues to marginalise and other Gypsy and Traveller children within the school environment.

Research Questions

The main focus of the research was to explore issues of 'good practice' in schools to examine aspects of social inclusion for Gypsy and Traveller children. The research also focussed on aspects of identity and the relationship between Gypsy and Traveller culture and the education system. We also consider whether teachers and pupils agency have the power to produce a different, more equitable, space in which children from Gypsy/Traveller communities are able to be seen and achieve their full potential.

Methods

Sixty in-depth interviews were carried out with head teachers, class room teachers, parents and pupils from Gypsy and Traveller backgrounds. All of the interviews were tape recorded and the data transcribed. The data was analysed by using methods of grounded theory as developed by Charmaz (2006). The aim was to develop themes and concepts from which to generate a theoretical understanding of the key questions.

Frame

The research focussed on the theoretical perspective of Bauman (1997) and Simmel (1971) and draws on the concept of the 'stranger' to examine the outsider position of Gypsy and Traveller children within the school space. This paper will also draw on the work of Lefebvre (1991), and apply his theoretical notions around the production of space within a spatial education policy sociological framework. By combining these two theoretical positions this paper will examine the extent to which policy construction of the social, mental and lived spaces of schools perpetuates the 'othering' of children from Gypsy/Traveller communities.

Research findings

The research found that Gypsy and Traveller children are portrayed as 'outsiders' and this is reinforced by their school experiences that fails to acknowledge their culture and life experiences. Further, Gypsy and Travellers as a community are portrayed as 'strangers' and schools are examples of 'sites' where the discrimination of Gypsy/Traveller children is continually played out as a social reality. However, it is within the realm of the lived space of schools that provides individuals, both teachers and students, with the opportunity to operate differently, and thus challenge the expected 'norms', 'behaviour' and culture of a schools conceived (mental) space.