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**“Inside the School Where 98% of the Pupils are Travellers”:  
Exploring and Challenging Stereotypes Regarding the  
Educational Experiences of Irish Travellers.**

**Abstract**

This paper explores and challenges stereotypes regarding the educational experiences of Irish Travellers. Using concepts from Post-Colonial Theory, this paper explores the othering of Irish Travellers and how they attempt to overcome the barriers associated with this othering. The author utilises Feminist Theory to examine gender norms within Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and how some women are choosing to challenge these norms and do gender differently. The author concludes that critically examining stereotypes and how they are perpetuated by the media can create a more just society, where settled and Traveller children can be educated together without fears of bullying and racism.

**Key words:** Educational Experiences; Irish Travellers; School; Stereotypes; Travellers.

**Introduction**

In 2017, the BBC published an article titled ‘Inside the School Where 98% of the Pupils are Travellers’ which offered a unique insight into Crays Hill Primary School, a primary school located in Essex where almost all of the pupils are Irish Travellers (Cawley, 2017). In stark contrast to the 2011 article by the Daily Mail titled ‘Village school that’s the forgotten victim of the Dale Farm invasion’ (Bird, 2011), the BBC

article depicts this small school as a pleasant place to be, where children paint pictures of fantasy creatures and take dance lessons. News media plays a key role in shaping the public's perceptions of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities and most reports are overwhelmingly negative (Bhopal, 2011; OpenDemocracy, 2016; Leahy, 2014). While this article by the BBC goes a long way in breaking down the negative stereotypes associated with Irish Travellers, it did at times perpetuate stereotypes or use inappropriate terminology. These instances are explored throughout this paper along with further explanation about the significant harm that such stereotypes have caused for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Using concepts from Post-Colonial Theory, this paper explores the othering of Irish Travellers and how they attempt to overcome the barriers associated with this othering. Feminist Theory is also utilised to examine gender norms within Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and how some women are choosing to challenge these norms and do gender in a different way. Finally, the systematic inequalities that Irish Travellers face are examined through an intersectional perspective in order to illuminate their significant disadvantage in multiple areas, and to explore how Crays Hill Primary School is attempting to combat this.

Irish Travellers are a heterogeneous group of indigenous peoples from Ireland who refer to themselves as Pavees or Minceirs (Cavaliero and Levinson, 2019). In the UK, Irish Travellers are frequently categorised under the umbrella terms Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller; Gypsy-Traveller; or Traveller, all of which are frequently used in research and risk obscuring the diversity of the various groups that fall under these labels, reducing them to a set of core traits that are often inaccurate (Foster and Norton, 2012; Mulcahy et. al, 2017; Tremlett, 2014). For example, the grouping of Gypsy/Roma used in the School Census is problematic as Roma pupils who have recently moved to the UK have

different support needs to English Romany Gypsies (Mulcahy et. al, 2017) and the term Gypsy is considered pejorative in much of Europe as it has been weaponised as an insult (Klaus, 2019). Regardless of which label is used, all are considered proper names and should thus be capitalised (Simhandl, 2006), which the BBC fails to do when referring to Travellers both in the title and throughout the article, except when referring specifically to Irish Travellers (Cawley, 2017). The BBC is the most widely viewed and highly trusted news broadcaster in the UK and thus plays a key role in shaping public perceptions (Nielsen, Schulz, and Fletcher, 2020). While the BBC is bound by impartiality and rejects assertions that it is biased (Farber, 2019), Lewis and Cushion (2017) assert that by choosing to report a certain story, the BBC in some way legitimises it even if the author does not agree with the claims being made.

Newspaper headlines overwhelmingly characterise Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities as 'dirty thieves' who are a detriment to local communities (Foster and Norton, 2012) and the BBC is no exception. Their Travellers news section includes articles about "Terrorising Travellers" (BBC, 2020a), a local woman's "desperate plea" about encampments (BBC, 2020b), and how parents with a "severely disabled daughter" are fearful of a proposed Gypsy site near their home (BBC, 2018).

Negative stereotypes in the media have radiating effects on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities as they increase stigma and hostility surrounding the provision of accommodation, with many local communities gathering to protest against proposed sites (OpenDemocracy, 2016). Lack of secure accommodation means that for many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, education does not take priority as they struggle to access schooling (McCaffery, 2009). While the newspaper article discussed in this article is generally positive, the wording is at times problematic and perpetuates negative stereotypes

about Irish Travellers. For example, "...the primary school in Crays Hill was at the heart of village life. Then came Dale Farm, which grew to become Europe's largest traveller sites..." locates deficit within the Travellers, who 'invaded' the village, rather than placing blame on the locals who all chose to withdraw their children from the school in protest (Cawley, 2017).

Freire (1977, in O'Hanlon, 2010) argued that the majority population of any given society see themselves at the centre and place marginal groups on the outskirts as outsiders. To illustrate this, Sir Jerry Wiggin (1997, in Turner, 2002) stated in a parliamentary debate with regards to Gypsy and Traveller sites: "Why must the new site be within five miles of a former school, and why should there be facilities for this, that and the other?". Meanwhile, the local residents of Crays Hill garnered sympathy in an article published by the Daily Mail as parents lamented their 'exhausting' six mile commute to a new primary school after withdrawing their children from Crays Hill Primary School (Bird, 2011). While Gypsy and Traveller communities are frequently labelled as a problem that needs to be fixed (Webb, 2009), by withdrawing their children from school in protest we can see that even when Travellers conform to the norms of the dominant society and attend formal schooling, they still are not welcomed by the local community. Although it is frequently claimed that Irish Travellers willingly separate themselves from society, Hamilton, Bloom, and Potter's (2012) interviews with Traveller families indicate that this is not the case – rather that cost and transportation difficulties were preventing them from accessing activities that would allow them to interact more with settled people. The BBC article supports these findings, as the head teacher at Crays Hill states that it is the unwillingness of settled parents to enrol their children into the school that prevents more mixing (Cawley, 2017).

The BBC article also plays briefly into stereotypes regarding the mysterious and secretive nature of Travellers, with sentences such as "...barely anybody wants to talk about this village school. At least not in public", "not a single Traveller parent would allow their child to talk about their school on camera or allow their children's faces to be photographed", and "...beyond this apparent wall of silence lies a hive of activity". While the article may simply be attempting to draw readers in, this wording is reminiscent of stereotypes about the 'Good Gypsies' who are mysterious people who travel in horse drawn carts, tell fortunes, and lead exciting lives (Tremlett, 2014; Derek and McDonald, 1999). In Post-Colonial studies, the term Orientalism is used to describe similar discourse that was used by the West to justify colonialism and imperialism in the East (Rizvi and Lingard, 2006). The Orient (the East) was characterised as mysterious, eccentric, sensual, and backwards, simultaneously a subject of fascination and an object to be fixed by the West (Said, 1985; Rizvi and Lingard, 2006). By implying that the Travellers are at fault for the lack of settled children in the school and by implying that they are secretive, the BBC has 'othered' Travellers, perpetuating the idea that they are deviant (Cemlyn, 2008). Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller cultures and languages are rarely positively depicted in the mass media or education and this undervaluing and misunderstanding is cited as a major reason for disengagement from education for parents and pupils from these communities (Rosario et. al, 2017; Hamilton, 2018; Matras, Howley, and Jones, 2020).

A further stereotype about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents and pupils is that they do not value education and this is often offered up as the reason for their low attainment and attendance. However, Deuchar and Bhopal (2013) found that Traveller parents did value education but felt that their concerns about bullying and a lack of support were being ignored. Likewise, Lloyd and McClusky (2008, in D'Arcy, 2014) found that the denial of difference and failure to

recognise and appreciate Traveller culture led to many families being disengaged. A recent study found that bullying and prejudice were mentioned by 86% and 73% of Traveller students respectively as their biggest challenge in schools (The Traveller Movement 2019, in Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2020). The BBC makes good progress on dispelling this stereotype throughout the article. One of the photographs featured in the article is that of a protest held at Basildon town hall during the Dale Farm evictions, full of children holding up signs saying “I love my school” and “we want to stay in school” (Cawley, 2017). A recent Ofsted (2017) report of Crays Hill Primary found this to be true, commenting that the children understand the value of their education and hope it will translate to a better future. O’Hanlon (2010) also found that Gypsies/Travellers value education, but worry that it will not translate into employment due to discrimination in the workplace.

Irish Travellers are highly underrepresented in secondary and higher education, with only 8% completing secondary and 1% obtaining a university degree and this helps to perpetuate inequalities generationally as they do not have the qualifications necessary to gain employment (Boyle, Fynn and Hanafin, 2020). Most Traveller sites have poor sanitation and are located in areas with high pollution, far away from necessary amenities and transportation which leads to poorer health outcomes (Hudson, 2009; Levinson, 2017; Powell, 2013) and Travellers who live in permanent housing experience high levels of deprivation and exclusion as well (McFadden et. al, 2016).

High levels of discrimination in education, the workplace, and within their local communities lead to many Travellers hiding their identities (The Traveller Movement, 2017). D’Arcy (2014) found that many parents and pupils were fearful of revealing their identity as Travellers in settings where they were a minority and instead ‘played white’. Smith and Greenfields (2012) spoke to several Gypsy-Traveller respondents who hid their identity in order to obtain work. This links

closely with Bhabha's concept of mimicry which is explored within post-colonial theory as a method of masking one's own cultural identity and copying the identity of the coloniser (Singh, 2017). According to Bhabha, mimicry is a method of undermining the power of the coloniser, not intended to flatter or serve the interests of the dominant group (Bhabha, 1984). However, mimicry is often perceived to be an opportunistic pattern of behaviour aiming to take power for the individual who is mimicking rather than to undermine the authority of the coloniser (Singh, 2017). Hamilton's (2018) interviews with Gypsy/Traveller girls found that those who attended secondary school were frequently mocked or ostracised within their communities for acting too much like a settled person.

While at Crays Hill students do not have to hide their cultural identity, concerns about secondary education attendance were noted in the BBC article (Cawley, 2017). Foster and Norton (2012) identified numerous push and pull factors that influence Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents and pupils' decisions to attend secondary education, including the fear that secondary education will either undermine their culture or signal that they are being disloyal to their community. The transition to secondary school may be particularly stressful for Travellers who have attended a Traveller-only primary school and must transition to a secondary school with mostly settled children. This concern was voiced by many parents at St. Mary's Primary School in Belfast, another school which has struggled to recruit settled children after gaining a reputation as a school for Travellers (Hamilton, Bloomer, and Potter, 2012).

Gender can be conceptualised as a matter of 'doing' rather than 'being' (West and Zimmerman, 2009), an ongoing social process that is achieved and upheld rather than identified at birth. How women and men perform gender is intertwined with their cultural identity, and in the case of Gypsy and Traveller communities, doing gender is seen

as a way to maintain cultural identity in a world that increasingly expects them to conform (Casey, 2014). Butler (2009) argues that gender is performative, a series of unconscious actions influenced by the societal norms that influence us beginning at birth. Butler emphasises that this does not mean that we choose to perform gender, and even when attempting to undo gender we work within the regulatory frame of established gender norms (Salih, 2002 in Lovaas and Jenkins, 2007).

However, challenging normative assumptions about gender can create opportunities and there is evidence that within the Traveller community, particularly amongst young people, gender norms are being challenged. While young women within Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are generally expected to care for the home and children, a report from the House of Commons (2019) found that many of the girls aspired to attend university and pursue a career, although it was recognised that there were barriers within and outside of the community that would make this difficult. In McGaughey's (2014) interviews with Irish Travellers of various age groups, some of the young people resisted the idea that the man was the head of the household, instead suggesting that men were lazy and that the division of work should be more equal. This is supported by Smith's (2017) and Hamilton's (2018) findings that indicate not all young women accept their place as caretakers and mothers as is traditional and would rather pursue different avenues of life. Additionally, there are a growing number of community activists, mainly young GRT women working in rights advocacy organisations, who are fighting for their rights both as women and as members of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities (Foster and Norton, 2012).

## **Conclusion: Triple discrimination**

Travellers are often at the intersection of multiple overlapping oppressions, experiencing 'triple discrimination' (Hamilton, Bloomer, and Potter, 2012). Casey (2014) argues that Gypsy-Traveller women often face the triple burden of gender, class, and race. Friends, Families, and Travellers (2020) highlight that Gypsies and Travellers in the LGBT+ community have higher rates of suicide, full-time carers within the community report poor health, and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller prisoners are twice as likely to report depression but less likely to receive support. Wilkin et al. (2010) found that Gypsy Roma Traveller pupils have the highest rates of special educational needs and recognise this is likely due to inequalities in both education and healthcare. As of 2006, two-thirds of Irish Travellers qualified for free school meals compared to eighteen percent of the general population. These numerous overlapping oppressions can be explored through an intersectional perspective, which looks at the combined impact of multiple inequalities rather than looking at each as an individual problem (Nash, 2008). Intersectionality recognises that this overlap creates distinct experiences for those affected by them, and that the solutions must also be multifaceted, looking at all areas that affect a person's life, including work, education, the home, and the media (Hill-Collins, 2015).

While the BBC article does not delve into gender, it does state that seventy-five percent of students at Crays Hill Primary School are eligible for free school meals. Rated Ofsted 'Good' with 'Outstanding' elements (Ofsted, 2017), it is evident that the educators at Crays Hill are working hard to ensure their pupils, who experience the double burden of ethnicity and class, are supported to succeed. The head teacher explains that the children are separated by ability rather than year groupings in order to provide more relevant teaching (Cawley, 2017), and the Ofsted report describes their success at providing

assessment and support immediately once children return from travelling for extended periods. Crays Hill was also recognised in a good practice guide published by The Traveller Movement (2019) for their extensive engagement with parents through providing open classroom days during school hours, literacy workshops for parents, and visits to local sites. These strategies have shown to be effective, with both attendance and attainment improving (Cawley, 2017; Ofsted, 2017) and could thus be utilised by other educational settings in order to support pupils and parents from Irish Traveller backgrounds. While the article initially suggests that Crays Hill was 'once the heart of the village', it could be argued that it still is. Critically examining stereotypes and how they are perpetuated by the media can create a more just society, where settled and Traveller children can be educated together without fears of bullying and racism.

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