
WELCOME TO THE ROMA? EDUCATION PRACTITIONERS' ATTEMPTS TO RESIST A DOMINANT NEGATIVE DISCOURSE ABOUT ROMA CHILDREN.

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Abstract

This article critically examines the dilemmas experienced by education practitioners as they work with schools in two towns to overcome resistance to Roma children newly arrived in England from Slovakia. Through case study I analyse how practitioners describe, recognise, understand and respond to a prevalent negative discourse about Roma children. Such a discourse obscures and validates (at an institutional level) inequality and breaches of human rights for Roma children. Bauman's theory of the 'outsider' and 'stranger' illuminates the complex operation of such discourse. Some education practitioners were able to resist the dominant negative discourses and present alternative responses; others retreated into their personal space where they maintained the familiar by replicating or extending the discourse. Education practitioners need opportunities to connect the 'personal troubles of the milieu' with the 'public issues of the social structure' (Mills, 1959). In this way practitioners may shape their own practice in ways that resist the hegemonic structures that perpetuate inequality for Roma children.

Keywords: Children/Young People; Family; Social Structure; Roma; Practitioners

Introduction

My study explored responses to the inequalities experienced by Roma families as they attempt to access education when they first arrive in the United Kingdom from Eastern Europe. The research arose from the dilemmas experienced by a group of specialist practitioners working with schools to promote inclusion of Roma families and children. ‘Specialist practitioners’ include advisory teachers, local authority officers responsible for schools admissions, Education Welfare Officers and family liaison officers; in this case the common factor was that they all worked with Roma families. I use the term ‘specialist practitioner’ as a strategy to ensure anonymity for participants as a response to the ethical issues in the research setting. However, ‘practitioner’ is also used to demonstrate a relationship of respect between researcher and participant as I recognise practitioners work in ways that are characterised by thoughtful and reflexive action (Costley, Elliot and Gibbs, 2010).

Dilemmas, I observed, occurred when practitioners and their institutions responded to incidents where children experience inequality and breaches of human rights. I relate such dilemmas to Mills’ (1959, p.6) description of the ‘personal troubles of the milieu’ where issues arise in the self and the local environment, and the ‘public issues of the social structure’ where issues arise with values and in the life of institutions or in the public realm. Mills later suggests that the process of connecting the ‘personal troubles’ and the ‘public issues’ is transformative for the individual, enabling them to focus and move from indifference to involvement in public issues. By focusing on this dynamic I explore how specialist practitioners attempted to resist a dominant negative discourse about Roma families.

In the United Kingdom the term ‘Gypsy, Roma and Traveller’ is regularly used in academic research and in policy to describe all Gypsy and Traveller groups, as well as Roma from Eastern Europe (Wilkin, Derrington and Foster, 2009a, p.1). I observe that ‘Gypsy,

Roma and Traveller’ is often abbreviated by education practitioners to ‘GRT’ so that audiences are unaware of its meaning. Use of ‘GRT’ communicates an impression of homogeneity instead of emphasising the diversity and complexity of background, origins and experience. Belton’s (2010) research about identity rejects the notion of externally defined categories. He argues that the process of constantly fixing identity leads to discrimination and a determination of who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’. In my study ‘Roma’ children and their families are people who self-identify and describe their movement throughout Europe (including to the United Kingdom) following the collapse of the communist regimes in countries such as the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia and Lithuania. Initially families came to the United Kingdom as asylum seekers and then as migrants following the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 (European Dialogue, 2009). As researcher I challenge my assumptions about Roma identity and my knowledge of the discourse that impacts on the construction of ‘Roma’.

Learning from the literature

What is the experience of Roma children and their families in education?

Literatures about the experience of Roma children in the (United Kingdom) UK are relatively recent, reflecting the arrival of Roma people in the UK from 1995 onwards. There is wide acceptance that a common reason for Roma migration is to escape racism and discrimination (European Union Fundamental Rights Agency, 2009; European Dialogue, 2009). Research in the UK has primarily been conducted by voluntary sector organisations either as surveys to establish the circumstances of Roma (for example, European Dialogue, 2009) or as advocacy projects to ensure that children’s and family’s voices are heard. Such research has a stated purpose of developing policy and provision as well as raising wider public awareness (Ureche, Manning and Franks, 2005 and Children’s Society, 2009b).

Research into the situation of Romanian Roma in London describes the extent of discrimination experienced by children and their families as both Roma and asylum seekers and the degree to which prejudice is increased by negative media coverage (Ureche et al, 2005). The invisibility of Roma families to public services is a key issue; one survey found that Roma families remain invisible to service providers because they may choose not to declare their ethnic background or families have little or no contact with any services (European Dialogue, 2009).

In a review of European research Wilkin et al (2009a) report little empirical evidence on the education of Roma children that was directly related to the UK. However, they note similarities between the situation of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers in the UK and across the European Union. Themes include the high proportion of children identified with special educational needs and placed in special schools, the high drop-out rate as children progress through education, the experiences of racism and bullying in school and the impact of economic disadvantage. The impact of poverty on access to education for the Roma is identified as an area insufficiently explored both in the UK and more widely across Europe (Unicef, 2007).

Within the wider European context there is agreement amongst researchers and commentators on the range of factors that influence the inequality in education of Roma children (Liegeois, 1998; European Commission, 2004a and 2004b; Save the Children, 2001; European Union Monitoring Centre 2006 and European Union Fundamental Rights Agency, 2009). Such studies find that access to education and attainment is affected by direct and systemic discrimination and exclusion. Discrimination is compounded by poverty, poor access to services and marginalisation that influence Roma children's ability to participate in education. The exclusion and discrimination is characterised by, for example, invisibility in the curriculum, forms of school or classroom segregation, difficulties in enrolment and

maintaining attendance, physical segregation of living accommodation and unaddressed racism (European Union Monitoring Centre, 2006).

How do education practitioners' respond to the Roma children and their families?

Literatures exploring the responses of education practitioners to the inequality and breaches of human rights of Roma children are limited. Recent research about Roma in the UK (European Dialogue, 2009) points out the lack of awareness and knowledge on the part of practitioners about the needs of Roma. They suggest this is a significant issue and leads to a lack of response or inappropriate responses to children and their families. More positively, in the wider European context, literature suggests that effective practitioners hold a strong moral commitment to address the inequality of Roma children. They achieve this through engagement with Roma families, reflection on the barriers to inclusion and taking action within their realm of influence to promote Roma inclusion (European Commission, June 2010). There are three themes which emerge from this wider European research that raise concerns. Firstly, there is evidence that teachers' tolerance of the harassment of Roma by peers and other teachers within schools is widespread (European Union Monitoring Centre, 2006); secondly, the causes of inequality of Roma are not understood (European Union Monitoring Centre, 2006) and thirdly, teachers have low expectations of Roma (Liegeois, 1998).

Although the literature has mapped the issues, challenges and impact of the non-inclusion of Roma children in schools it has not yet arrived at an understanding of how education practitioners engage in this agenda and establish a new set of strategies that can be drawn upon to achieve more positive outcomes for Roma children and their families.

Research aims and questions

My broad aim was to consider how the findings from literature may support an understanding of the prevalent discourse

about Roma children and their families operating in schools and the communities in which they are situated. On a further level I aimed to explore what may support education practitioners in arriving at an alternative response using Mills' (1959) notion of connecting the 'personal troubles' with the 'public issues of the social structure'.

My research questions were:

What are the prevalent discourses about Roma children that practitioners describe in their work?

How do practitioners respond to such a discourse?

What enables or inhibits their response?

Research methodology and methods

Prior to the commencement of the research I reflected on the relevance of qualitative methodology to this study. As the research setting was my workplace I had the dual role of both specialist practitioner and researcher. Qualitative research as a paradigm positions the researcher as an integral part of the research setting (Holiday, 2007). Cresswell's (2009) notion of research as interpretive inquiry supports an understanding of how I approached the study:

'Qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear and understand. Their interpretations cannot be separated from their own backgrounds, history, context and understanding.' (Cresswell, 2009)

Through qualitative methodology I explored my presence in the research setting (Holiday, 2007). I was critically aware of the challenges and tensions of being an insider researcher (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010) including issues of power.

Qualitative research enabled me to explore the complexity of the research setting:

'Qualitative researchers deploy a range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand. It is understood, however, that each practice makes the world visible in a different way.' (Denzin and

Lincoln, 2005)

As researcher I anticipated that multiple understandings would emerge in the accounts of specialist practitioners of their work. Case study was an appropriate methodology as the phenomenon under study was inseparable from the context of the schools and the community (Yin, 2003). As a methodology, case study is instrumental (Stake, 1995) in enabling insight to the research questions in a specific context. My aim was not generalise the findings but to gain understandings that may suggest a series of considerations for future work with Roma children and their families in education contexts.

In planning the data collection through interviews I reflected on the ethical considerations that emerged from the research setting and my presence as both research and specialist practitioner. My approach was supported by Pring's (2004) principles for ethical relationships between researchers and participants. This included providing opportunities for the participants to question the research and also challenge the findings from the research. All six participants interviewed were specialist practitioners who had a critical role in promoting Roma inclusion in schools; they worked to make contact with the Roma families and engage them in the process of accessing education. They also worked with teachers in schools to develop inclusive curriculum and practice. Their work was situated in two towns where there had been a significant growth in the Roma community as a result of migration across Europe; they worked with 8 schools and 25 Roma families over a period of six months spanning this study. I adopted the notion of the interview as a '*negotiated accomplishment*' (Fontana and Frey, 2003) recognising that conversations are shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place. I was aware of the power-dynamics operating in the research setting between specialist practitioners and schools and that this may impact on the interview process. I obtained informed consent but also took steps to ensure the anonymity and

confidentiality of participants in the analysis of data. I carefully negotiated the location of the interviews by asking the participants for preferences. I planned specific strategies at each stage of the interview process to promote the participation of the interviewee and counter my position as interviewer. My strategy was to enable the interviewee to tell the story of their involvement (Stake, 1995). As a way of beginning the interview I drafted a series of open questions to enable practitioners to tell their story, what they said, what they saw, how they responded and the factors that influenced their actions. After the interview I submitted the transcripts to participants for checking as a further strategy to give participants a voice.

Specialist practitioner's accounts of their work

Specialist practitioners revealed a prevailing negative discourse on Roma children and their families. The structure of this discourse emerged from the interviews; fragments reflected how the discourse established, consolidated and implemented power relationships in the research setting (Foucault, 1980, p.93). Dominant strands of the discourse are described below.

Denial of Roma identity

They described how the discourse that denies and fails to engage with Roma children's identity was produced; one specialist practitioner said:

'A lot of practitioners thought they were Romanian, other people just considered that they were Slovaks in the sense that they were not Gypsies and everyone else in Slovakia was like these people. So there was a lack of understanding about their history.' (Practitioner D)

Specialist practitioners suggested that the denial of identity is informed by an absence of knowledge about the needs or history of Roma. They observed a sense of resentment at the presence of Roma:

'Depending on their view of Roma - practitioners often felt that Roma were being

obstructive and not willing to engage rather than seeing them as having been a victim of prejudice and not having the confidence to engage.' (Practitioner C)

'Resentment! Teachers say that the Roma children take up a lot of their time, they set up a support system and the child does not turn up. The teachers say they are not attending. The children tend to move a lot. There is a lot of resentment at the wasted time.' (Practitioner B interview)

Consideration of admission to school did not involve a discussion about the needs of children but about the lack of resources and I suggest this discourse obscures inequality. Specialist practitioners recognised that the narratives about the Roma promote a version of the 'truth' (i.e. 'living off taxes'); in this way I suggest that specialist practitioners were aware how relationships of power constituted and permeated the social body of the school (Foucault, 1980).

Roma children as the 'other'

My analysis revealed how negative discourse about Roma cumulated in the setting. Specialist practitioners encountered a discourse in schools that positioned Roma children as the 'other':

'People did not have the information. If we go back to the boy peeing in the corner in the playground - that can be a foul disgusting piece of behaviour or it can be that he has not been used to using a toilet and then it is not a foul disgusting piece of behaviour. It is something that the child needs help with.' (Practitioner D)

They found a lack of recognition of Roma children's needs and I suggest an alternative interpretation would be to consider this response as a denial of children's needs. This raises a question as to whether responses to Roma children (either the child urinating in the playground or the disruptive child in the classroom) are dependent upon practitioners having information about that child's background in order to make their response more 'compassionate'.

Resistance to meeting needs

Specialist practitioners described a discourse that validates a position of ‘no response’, ‘slow response’ or a ‘resistant response’ to the needs of Roma children on the basis of a belief that families would be in the locality for a short time. This was a further example of how a negative discourse about Roma cumulated in the research setting:

‘People don’t want to change they don’t want to address these needs because they say in a few years’ time they will be gone - they would have moved on. That is not going to happen - this is their home.’ (Practitioner E)

Maintaining the status quo from the intrusion of the unwelcome visitors became a focus for activity. Specialist practitioners described different responses in schools. Firstly, they identified the juxtaposition of schools complaining about the presence of Roma but then not engaging in opportunities for change:

‘We organised the Roma day last week and one issue was that only one school leader attended - though recently all the schools were saying why do we have to have those families? I just thought they need to realise why families are coming to the UK - how bad it is for them. All the issues about employment, why they don’t engage in bureaucracy..... School practitioners think it is somebody else’s problem and that someone else will deal with it rather than take responsibility.’ (Practitioner E)

Specialist practitioners observed how people adopt different positions toward Roma children. I suggest they recognised how discourse impacts on the opportunities open to individual Roma children. This is an illustration of how the relationships of power in the settings created a specific discourse about Roma (Foucault, 1980).

I argue that such a discourse about Roma families deflected from any consideration about their experiences of inequality and the denial of their rights. Bauman’s (1997) theoretical perspectives of the ways in which society creates and positions groups of people as the ‘other’ or the ‘stranger’ to be feared provides insight into the power and

operation of the discourse about Roma in the research setting. Roma culture was presented as problematic; the discourse systematically produced and circulated a cumulative message (Foucault, 1980) that a consideration of the issues experienced by Roma children was outside of the remit of schools and that schools did not have the skills and resources needed to meet their complex needs.

Dilemmas for specialist practitioners

Throughout the interviews Specialist practitioners described a range of dilemmas in their work; I suggest that these were expressions of the personal troubles of the milieu (Mills 1959) as they were unresolved.

Inspections and targets

Specialist practitioners identified inspections and targets in relation to attendance and attainment as a dilemma. They perceived this in a number of ways:

‘All the schools are being judged on their attendance figures and that is all they are worried about. I have spoken to the practitioner responsible for attendance and asked if there is a way that we can work in schools to look at how we get 99% attendance or whatever, that is never going to happen but it is better than it was before. They might have 89%.’ (Practitioner E)

‘The target driven culture has a huge impact. It causes resentment and pressure on teachers who have classes with many issues in socially deprived areas and those teachers are still being expected to get those children to those targets.’ (Practitioner A)

They described the challenge of working with schools dominated by this external environment. I argue that the inspection and targets regime presents schools with dilemmas; specialist practitioners frequently gave this as a reason for schools not admitting Roma children.

Mismatch between policies and needs

Specialist practitioners recognised policy and practice frameworks were incompatible with the needs of Roma families. For example,

secondary school admission policies are not responsive to children who arrived in the area in the middle of the year.

'The Roma families do not know the systems here and these families who arrive mid-term they do not know how to access the services. A lot of children slip through the net - the schools tend not to support the families particularly primary and secondary transfer. The literature they send home is in English.' (Practitioner B)

This specialist practitioner recognised the inequality of access to secondary school for the child because the policy and practice framework does not respond to the particular needs of the family.

Another specialist practitioner pointed out that the admission process to primary school often results in children within the same family being split across schools:

"Sometimes we have had cases where the families have been offered two or three different schools for their children. One case we heard of recently was for children in the same family to go to school in two different towns. Absolutely ludicrous when you start to think about the families who culturally do not feel it is appropriate for children to travel very far away from them anyway and they have not got the money to send their children on buses to school and the actual practicalities of getting three children into three different schools." (Practitioner A)

This specialist practitioner recognised that the policy of splitting families between schools did not promote equality of opportunity in access to education. The family did not have the economic or other resources to be able to realise the opportunity of the school place that had been offered to them.

Issues of responsibility and challenge

Schools' failure to take responsibility for Roma children was raised repeatedly as a dilemma and this led to significant barriers for specialist practitioners in working with or challenging schools. One specialist practitioner described the way in which schools 'refer' families to her:

'They think that those parents are not their

responsibility. They flag them up to our service to refer them to us. They are not treated equally.' (Practitioner B)

She suggested schools pass over responsibility for children to her in a way that they would not for other families.

Practitioners struggled to find authoritative sources to enable analysis and resolution of the dilemmas they faced in working with schools to achieve Roma inclusion. In this sense some specialist practitioners occupied a space of moral ambiguity or moral crisis (Bauman, 1993).

Practitioners shaped alternative responses to the dominant negative discourse

I found some specialist practitioners retreated into their own space and disengaged with the issues for the Roma whilst others responded to this dominant negative discourse and struggled to resolve the dilemmas in their own practice. They did not use the terms such as 'equality', 'inequality' or 'human rights', however, they were very clear about the inequality of opportunity in access to school. Analysis revealed a number of partial and fragmented strategies, however, they were recognisably responses formulated through the struggle to find points of references within the context of moral ambiguity.

Focusing on the facts

Some specialist practitioners adopted an approach of 'focusing in the facts' with a goal of educating the schools on the legacy of disadvantage and discrimination faced by the Roma.

"I am training the teachers as they don't understand the background." (Practitioner F)

"I talked to practitioners and attempted to bust the myths about the Roma put about by the media. I focused on the facts and how the Roma have adapted and moved on." (Practitioner C)

Specialist practitioners believed that giving schools information on the background of Roma would promote a positive response. I observed a reliance on this approach in specialist practitioners' initial engagement with schools. Although this strategy enabled

schools to understand the needs of Roma children, I did not find evidence of specialist practitioners reflecting or evaluating the effectiveness of such an approach.

Facilitating contact with Roma families

Specialist practitioners described an approach of enabling schools to have contact with Roma families as a way of addressing discriminatory attitudes:

“Some schools I think have moved on because they get one child or one family who do well, they attend and they succeed and they think ok.” (Practitioner E)

“We say ‘you do need to be positive’ and to build up that trust with the families and that face to face communication with the Roma families is key because they need to build up the trust in you.” (Practitioner E)

I observed a reliance on the use of ‘contact’ with Roma children in order to challenge discriminatory and racist attitudes but without any robust evaluation; in some instances participants described that this actually reinforced and confirmed negative stereotypes. I observed specialist practitioners modelling practice or demonstrating alternative strategies in order to show that it was possible to work with Roma families.

In this way they indirectly challenged discriminatory practice. They promoted reflection amongst school staff by providing alternative perspectives.

“We keep trying to make leaders in the school or the staff actually realise that these families have the same needs and they want the best for their children. It may be the same as what the teacher wants. If the family do not think the child is going to be safe in the school then they won’t send them to school so the teacher needs to think why isn’t the child coming to school”. (Practitioner E)

The specialist practitioner engaged in a humanitarian dialogue with the school and introduced an alternative discourse on Roma families; such a discourse positions Roma children alongside all other children.

Initiating dialogue and debate

Specialist practitioners initiated ‘dialogue and debate’ by introducing discussion on

wider issues in order to challenge negative discourse.

“I am the Chair, it was quite a big group - each agency will talk about their viewpoint and it is a good thing that we can work together rather than everyone do their own thing. The challenges of education do get discussed, also health and housing. I might not have realised the big picture....”. (Practitioner F)

“People’s personal views get in the way of their professionalism. Sometimes they are racist - it is improving. They don’t realise it - they are just ignorant. It is their attitude they cannot see the bigger picture and how they can help the families.” (Practitioner F)

Some specialist practitioners used the phrase the ‘bigger picture’ frequently and I asked what they meant by this. The consistent response was that it was about looking beyond the immediate context. I observe how practitioners were skilled at introducing discussion about the ‘bigger picture’. They would ask questions that promoted new perspectives and probed the values and beliefs that operated in the setting.

Specialist practitioners engaged with the personal dilemmas they encountered on a daily basis in their work. They used their specialist skills and knowledge by modelling effective strategies to challenge inequality. They were aware of context in the ‘bigger picture’ that inhibited the effectiveness of their roles. They found opportunities to engage schools in dialogue and debate in order to formulate a way forward. I observed an emphasis on exploring the issues rather than seeking to understand why the school held discriminatory views. Specialist practitioners described how they engage or connect schools (and themselves) with the ‘bigger picture’ and that this led to new understandings.

Discussion

Although literature identifies the ‘invisibility’ of the Roma (EU Dialogue, 2009) I found the Roma families are visible in the research setting. My analysis of practitioner responses confirms the findings in the literature (EU

Dialogue, 2009; European Union Monitoring Centre, 2006) that lack of knowledge about the Roma families leads to inappropriate (or no) responses. This suggests that schools' responses to Roma children may be conditional on holding information and knowledge about their backgrounds. I argue 'lack of knowledge' becomes a persistent excuse for perpetuating situations of inequality or failure to take responsibility for families. Although in my study specialist practitioners had a strategy of 'focusing on the facts' my observation is that they did so without evaluating on the effectiveness of such an approach or considering whether schools needed to be provided with a framework for reflecting on the implications of such knowledge for their work with Roma children. This may include opportunities to reflect on and reposition the experiences of Roma families and their journey to the UK as a 'narrative of injustice' (Osler and Zhu, 2011).

I found that recognition of the negative discourse operating in the setting enabled specialist practitioners to critically reflect on their work with schools to promote Roma inclusion; for example they brought fresh interpretations to the impact of inspection and performance targets. Although specialist practitioners were aware of the ways in which education policies were non inclusive of Roma culture they felt compelled to work within these policies. I suggest that a future position may be to provide a framework for practitioners to explore and formulate a range of alternative solutions outside the established range of responses in institutional policies (Save the Children, 2001).

In their dialogue and debates with schools I observed that specialist practitioners placed an emphasis on exploring the issues rather than seeking to understand why the school held discriminatory views. They recognised that the later approach risked empathising or condoning discrimination. I observed that specialist practitioners did not refer to policy, legislation or guidance relating to equality or human rights agendas. There was

a reliance on providing information and facts about the legacy of inequality and breach of rights experienced by the Roma. Specialist practitioners remained unconnected to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); this meant that the struggles of the Roma were not interpreted as struggles for human rights. I suggest that had practitioners understood and used the UNCRC as an advocacy tool (Veerman, 1992) they may have moved beyond the provision of information to provide advocacy for Roma children's rights. By engaging in this wider theoretical framework I suggest that specialist practitioners may have made a strong link (within their own practice and in schools) between the 'personal troubles of the milieu' and the 'public issues of the social structure' (Mills, 1959). They may have shaped their own practice in ways that resist the hegemonic structures that perpetuate inequality for Roma children.

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