Chapter draft (4,900 words)

Responses to the marginalisation of Roma young people in education in an age of austerity in the United Kingdom

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Introduction

'Fear, loathing and prejudice in Blunkett's back yard: A deeply disturbing dispatch as the ex-Labour Home Secretary warns of race riots over the Roma influx in Sheffield'¹ is representative of media headlines in 2013 about the arrival of Roma people in Sheffield. I reflected on the way in which such events were reported as if they were commonplace; this resonated with the frequent media representations of English Gypsies as the 'other' (Bhopal and Myers, 2008) and earlier media reports of racism experienced by Roma in Northern Ireland in 2009. 'Romanian gypsies beware beware. Loyalist C18 are coming to beat you like a baiting bear,'² read the headlines as they repeated a text circulated widely through social media. McVeigh (2009) argues that the media narrative about the experiences of Roma remains uncontested and consistent; I further suggest that such a discourse circulated in the media locates Roma as problematic and is visible in education contexts where practitioners engage with Roma young people.

This chapter reports on research (Robson, 2012) emerging from the dilemmas of teachers and family workers as they worked in schools to include Roma young people in the United Kingdom (UK). The field work took place between 2009 and 2011; at the end of this period a newly elected Coalition government implemented a policy of austerity that led to significant reductions in public expenditure at a local level with the consequence services for children and families being 'eradicated, reorganised or pared down as a result' (O'Hara, 2014, p.3). This study explored how the experiences of **inequality and marginality** for Roma young people are understood by teachers and family workers as they worked in this changing environment. It concludes with a discussion of what might shape a response that has the potential to reduce inequality and address injustice for Roma young

¹ Reid, S. (2013) 'Fear, loathing and prejudice in Blunkett's back yard: A deeply disturbing dispatch as the ex-Labour Home Secretary warns of race riots over the Roma influx in Sheffield,' *The Mail on Sunday*, 15 November. Available at: <u>http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2508120/Fear-loathing-prejudice-Blunketts-yard-A-deeply-disturbing-dispatch-ex-Labour-Home-Secretary-warns-race-riots-Romainflux-Sheffield.html</u>. Accessed: 4 February 2016.

² McDonald, H. (2009) "Romanian gypsies beware beware. Loyalist C18 are coming to beat you like a baiting bear, '*The Guardian*, 21 June. Available at: <u>http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/21/race-northern-ireland-romanian-gypsies</u>. Accessed: 4 February 2016.

people; I suggest that in times of austerity actions to address inequality and discrimination may not be constrained by the available resources.

A lived experience of inequality: perspectives from the literature

Roma young people and their families moved throughout Europe (including to the United Kingdom) from countries newly formed following the collapse of the communist regimes (e.g. Czech Republic and Slovakia). Initially families came as asylum seekers to the UK and then as migrants following the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 (European Dialogue, 2009). In the United Kingdom the phrase 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' is frequently used in academic research in education and in education policy to describe all Gypsy and Traveller people, as well as Roma from Eastern Europe (Wilkin, Derrington and Foster, 2009). I observe how 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' is often abbreviated in education policy and practice to the label 'GRT' so that audiences are potentially unaware of its meaning. The uncritical use of 'GRT' communicates an impression of homogeneity instead of emphasising the diversity and complexity of background, origins and experiences of young people (Robson, 2012). Externally defined categories that arise through the need to fix identity are problematic; Belton (2010, p.42) argues that such identities can be 'permanent and unchanging' and lead to discrimination. Labels such as 'GRT' potentially mask the lived experience of Roma young people as they arrive in the UK.

The experience of inequality and discrimination for Roma as they migrate across the Europe Union is well documented; research has found that Roma are often stereotyped as societal problems and may find themselves even more marginalised in EU member states than in their country of origin (Fundamental Rights Agency, 2009). A recent study (Fundamental Rights Agency, 2014) of Roma education across 11 EU states (excludes the UK) found that Roma young people are subject to systemic segregation within education either in mainstream provision or through inappropriate placement in special schools. Thus, Roma young people (and their families) arriving in the UK do so often having been marginalised within education in their country of origin. An earlier review of research in the wider European context (European Union Monitoring Centre, 2006) identified the intersection of a range of factors that influenced the inequality in education provision and outcomes experienced by Roma young people; factors include direct and systemic discrimination, compounded by poverty, poor access to services and marginalisation. Early research into the lives of Roma young people in London found that they experienced racism, discrimination and prejudice in education when they first arrive in the UK (Ureche et al, 2005); similarly a more recent study found that Roma in the UK were viewed as having varied and complex needed compounded by the presence of poverty and the experience of entrenched discrimination (Brown, Scullion and Martin, 2013). Some studies provide a more hopeful picture, for example, a survey found that Roma children previously enrolled in segregated or special schools in their country of origin had made the transition to mainstream schools in the UK (European Dialogue, 2009b).

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Similarly a more recent study found that although 85% of Roma children and young people interviewed had been placed in special or segregated schools in their countries of origin, only a minority were considered to have special educational needs when they arrived in UK schools (Fremlova and Ureche, 2011). Their needs were such that they could be met within mainstream and not specialist provision. The same study found that a large majority of the Roma children and young people interviewed had experienced racist bullying and verbal abuse in school in their country of origin. However, in 7 out of the 8 UK localities within this study Roma children and young people reported they were not experiencing racism in their UK schools (Fremlova and Ureche, 2011). These findings suggest that Roma children and young people in the UK are not victims of structural and systemic discrimination within education found in other European states. However, the question remains as to how the prevalent societal discourse that locates Roma people as problematic impacts on their experience of education.

Using case study as a research methodology, I explored the responses of education practitioners working in two towns (one urban and one coastal) in the south east of England. Case study was appropriate as the phenomenon being studied (the ways in which teachers and family workers ³understood and responded to the inequality experienced by Roma young people) was inseparable from the context (Yin, 2003). Furthermore case study gave visibility to the diverse and sometimes contradictory views held by practitioners about young Roma people (Stake, 1995 and 2005). Foucault's (1980) theoretical perspective on discourse provided a framework for analysis of the researcher's observation as a participant and practitioners' accounts of their work with Roma young people.

The study arose from the researcher's observations of the dilemmas experienced by practitioners within secondary schools and the community as they responded to incidents where Roma young people experienced inequality and discrimination. Such dilemmas can be related to Mills' (1959) description of the 'personal troubles of the milieu' where issues arise in the self and in the local environment and in the 'public issues of the social structure'; where issues arise from the values and life of institutions or in the public realm. Through analysis of the dilemmas faced by teachers, family workers and young people the experiences of <u>inequality</u> and <u>marginality</u> for Roma became visible in the local and wider social structures.

Marginality of Roma young people

There was a prevailing and hegemonic discourse about Roma operating in the schools and the wider community. This discourse emerged as fragments from the analysis of data collected through interviews and participant observation. Such fragments revealed a discourse that established, consolidated and implemented relationships of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1980) within the research setting. The discourse was complex, dynamic and multi-faceted. It began with a denial of Roma identity; practitioners believed they were migrants from Slovakia or Romania and this inhibited consideration of the history or the legacy of discrimination. The young people were frequently referred to as the 'Romanians' even in situations where

³ Hereafter referred to as 'practitioners'.

they described themselves as Roma or where they provided identity that evidenced they came from another European country. The status of their families as migrants and their purpose in coming to the UK was continually questioned. Roma young people were perceived as a burden and as a drain on resources:

'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 wasted time.'

'Roma were viewed by practitioners as an additional burden and there were lots of discussions about the number of children and questions about the resources. So accepting the children into the class often became a discussion about the resources.'

'It is a whole picture – it is to do with the media. There are negative images about the Roma. It also mirrors what they hear from other services (e.g. benefit frauds). A lot of people believe that Roma are living off their taxes – it starts as a personal view and now it is across the whole service.'

'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.'

(Extracts from interviews with practitioners in the setting).

These accounts illustrate the resistance and resentment to meeting needs of children or understanding the reasons why young people may be hesitant to engage with support structures. Responses by some practitioners appeared conditional upon both the availability of additional resources and evidence that individual young people had been victims of discrimination in their countries of origin. Narratives about Roma young people promoted a version of the truth (i.e. 'living off taxes') and these were circulated uncritically within the schools and wider community. Bauman's (1997) perspective on the 'stranger' supports an understanding of the ways in which this discourse operated; he argues that such phenomena are an essential and often manufactured element within the post-modern society.

'What makes people strangers and therefore vexing, unnerving, off putting and otherwise a problem is – let us repeat – there tendency to befog and eclipse boundary lines which ought to be clearly seen,' (Bauman, 1997, p.25).

Roma children become the 'stranger' through a cumulative discourse that questioned their status and purpose as migrants and suggested their needs were too complex to be met by the school. This sustained a belief that additional resources are required to meet their needs and when resources are unavailable their needs cannot be met. This discourse establishes relationships of power (Foucault, 1980) in the setting that characterises Roma young people as a problematic group (Robson, 2012). Through the circulation of narratives that reported Roma young people as having low attendance at school they became feared 'strangers' who may contribute to a school's low ranking in performance tables or in inspection. Practitioners attributed the actual or risk of the school's poor performance in the statutory inspection to the Roma. Young people positioned in

this way become the 'vagabond' in Bauman's post-modern society; the focus for legitimised negativity where 'unspoken fears, secret self-deprecations and guilt too awesome to be thought of are dumped' (Bauman, 1997, p.25). This discourse operated in ways that resisted the arrival and acceptance of Roma young people within the school community and where the response of 'no action' by practitioners was legitimised on the basis that Roma young people would stay a short time before returning to their country of origin. McVeigh's (1997 and 2008) theory of sedentarism provides further insight into this discourse. It is a 'system of ideas and practices which serves to normalise and reproduce sedentary models of existence and pathologise and repress nomadic modes of existence,' (McVeigh, 1997, p.9). He further suggests that sedentarism can be enacted through intentional or unintentional practices that construct being 'sedentary' as the only possible mode of existence in society. Within the research setting Roma young people were constructed as problematic; it was suggested by practitioners that the support structures in the school could not anticipate or respond to their nomadism. The narrative operating in the setting validated the belief that Roma families were short term visitors in the locality. This discourse operated in ways that placed Roma young people on the margins within education settings; it failed to acknowledge or respond to their experiences and cumulated through the convergence and intersection of multiple negative discourses (e.g. migration, living on benefits, sedentarism, burden on resources, poor attenders, not victims of discrimination) operating in the setting. This resonates with Ureche et al's (2005) study that found Roma young people experienced racism, discrimination and prejudice in education.

Moving from sustaining to resisting the dominant discourse about Roma

Some practitioners sustained and replicated the hegemonic discourse about Roma young people in their work. They adopted a 'funded approach to the work' and promoted the view that addressing Roma disadvantage could only be achieved through additionally funded project work; a recent study (Brown, Scullion and Martin, 2013) highlighted the reliance in the UK on specialist posts and separately funded provision to meet the needs of Roma families. The same study found in a survey of local authorities that 60% of respondents viewed levels of funding as a barrier to successful work with Roma. At a time of 'austerity' the announcement in 2010 of a reduction of 19% in public expenditure⁴ and the removal of dedicated funding to promote the educational achievement of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children (Foster and Norton, 2012) contributed to a view that the funding intended for all young people in the school was not available for the Roma. A further practice that extended this discourse was the perception that Roma children need specialist support as their needs were considered to be so great that they cannot be met by teachers or other practitioners in schools; this reinforced the view teachers require specialist knowledge to include Roma young people within the learning

⁴ HM Treasury (2010) Spending Review 2010, London: The Stationery Office. Available at: <u>https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/203827/Spending_review_2</u> <u>010_executive_summary.pdf</u> . Accessed: 18 February 2016.

environment. This further positioned Roma young people as problematic. Similarly, Bhopal and Myers (2008, p.49) in their account of the formation of Gypsy identities argue that practices operating amongst practitioners working with Gypsy children remain uncontested and that this reinforces an attitude that Gypsy children are the responsibility of specialists. In an earlier study Bhopal (2004) found that some schools relinquished responsibility for the problems they associate with Gypsy children. This resonated with my findings that Roma young people were viewed as on the margin of teachers' and family workers' practice. This sense of professional helplessness was validated by a powerful discourse that positioned Roma young people beyond the reach of practitioners' skills and resources. Earlier studies (European Union Monitoring Centre, 2006) found that teachers are not able to identify the underlying causes of Roma children's low achievement and this hindered their ability to form an appropriate response. Furthermore within the wider European context programmes to address the education inequalities experienced by Roma young people are frequently structured as targeted (sometimes segregated) projects supported by short term funding (European Commission, 2010). In this way institutional structures act to validate, cumulate and replicate a discourse that positions Roma young people on the margins of education.

Some practitioners were aware of how relationships of power constituted and permeated the social body of their practice (Foucault, 1980). They resisted the hegemonic discourse operating within schools about Roma. By listening to and learning from the experiences of Roma young people they identified actions realisable in their own practice that would address the inequality of Roma children in education. Practitioners became aware of how local education policies discriminated against Roma children despite having the stated aim of enabling access to school. In accounts of their work some practitioners questioned whether policies were responsive to the needs of Roma. For example:

'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.'

'Sometimes we have had cases where the families have been offered two or three different schools for their children. 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.'

(Extracts from interviews with practitioners in the setting).

Practitioners recognised the impact of school admission policies and practices was to 'normalise and reproduce sedentary models of existence,' (McVeigh, 1997, p.9) and in this way the arrangements for

admission to school compounded the inequality experienced by Roma children. Responding to cultural issues may lead to practitioners and their institutions to make changes in practice (Save the Children, 2001). Through this process some practitioners developed new approaches outside the established practices within their institutions although many practitioners felt compelled to work within existing policies rather than explore alternative solutions.

By focusing on the universality of childhood some practitioners sought to reposition Roma young people alongside all young people in their setting. They introduced a humanitarian dialogue that emphasised themes of safety and well-being; in this way they initiated discussions that dispelled myths about Roma young people's needs as different from those of other young people in the setting; this countered the discourse that constructed Roma as the 'stranger' or that Roma young people's needs could not be met from within the resources available in the school. Through this pro-active approach practitioners contested the view that the needs of Roma children were so complex that they could only be met by teachers and family workers with 'expertise' about Roma. This challenges restrictive paradigms about work with Roma that may operate within practice settings. In an earlier study (Bhopal and Myers, 2008) argued that there was an unchallenged approach by academics and professionals in work with Gypsy communities and that this meant that 'new interpretations of Gypsy culture, engagements by the culture in new circumstances, or new approaches by the culture towards society are liable to be overlooked or ignored,'(p.43). By engaging in conversations about the needs of Roma young people as they accessed school in the UK practitioners gave visibility to the discrimination and challenges Roma faced in the new context.

Practitioners began to be aware of the negative discourse that operated about Roma young people. Schools openly discussed the suggestion that Roma young people had formed and remained in 'gangs'; by describing the friendship groups of Roma young people as 'gangs' practitioners extended the discourse that positioned the Roma as the 'other' or the 'stranger' and a phenomena to be feared (Bauman, 1997). Whilst some practitioners focused on the issues that the 'gangs' presented for the school (for example; that some young people and teachers found this intimidating) others began to explore the underlying reasons why Roma young remained together in a group (for example; fear of racist abuse and isolation). Practitioners began to initiate dialogue and debate about the experience and legacy of discrimination for Roma:

'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.'

'I think it is breaking barriers. I think teaching is about your belief system and your values system. Unless you are challenging that and you are getting people to question their own belief system, you are getting them to question prejudice and discrimination and to really look and unpeel the layers ...'

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(Extract from interviews with practitioners).

Initially practitioners adopted an approach of 'focusing on the facts' with a goal of educating their schools on the legacy of discrimination and discrimination faced by the Roma. I questioned the effectiveness of this approach as the provision of information about discrimination against Roma in a wider European context did not challenge practitioners working in schools to reflect on their own attitudes and the situation of young people in the locality. For some practitioners their responses to Roma young people appeared to be conditional on meeting individual young people and on hearing the narratives they gave about their experiences of injustice. It was only when practitioners moved beyond this approach of 'contact' with young people to engagement with the issues that they faced in the school and the locality that the connection was made to the wider systemic persecution and injustice that Roma people experienced as individuals and groups. Similarly, Osler and Starkey (2010) suggest that within human rights education the exploration of others' narratives can 'resonate with the struggles of learners' (p.143).

Shaping a response to challenge the inequality experienced by Roma young people in times of austerity.

This chapter began with an analysis of the entrenched discourse circulating in the media about Roma and the ways in which it remained uncontested. In the UK Roma young people did not experience the structural and systemic segregation in education universally found in their countries of origin (Fremlova and Ureche, 2011), however, I suggest that the hegemonic and negative discourse visible in schools in my study operated in ways that positioned Roma as a problematic group and influenced the response of education practitioners. In times of austerity the discourse established, consolidated and implemented relationships of power (Foucault, 1980); perceptions of Roma young people, their needs, the resources needed to meet their needs and the resources available in the school were shaped by the discourse. A version of the 'truth' about Roma young people permeated the schools as some practitioners sought to justify an approach that both denied the legacy of discrimination experienced by Roma and explicitly established the needs of Roma young as too great to be met by the resources and skills available in the school. The power of the discourse constructed Roma families as 'strangers' and 'vagabonds' to be feared (Bauman, 1997); it consolidated views of sedentarism operating in the setting by pathologising nomadic modes of existence (McVeigh, 2008). As a result Roma young people were marginalised within education and their lived experiences of discrimination remained hidden from practitioners' view.

Some practitioners pieced together fragments of the discourse through their experiences of working with Roma young people. Such experiences can be understood as 'ritual like' (they were linked to institutional processes such as policies or procedures), 'problematic' (they were troubling for practitioners and led to unresolved issues for Roma children) and 'routine' (they occurred regularly) (Denzin, 1989, p.33). Practitioners became aware of ways in which relationships of power were constituted and permeated the social body of their practice (Foucault, 1980); this new found knowledge led to responses that both resisted the hegemonic discourse and established alternative discourse about Roma. Mills (1959) framework of the 'personal troubles

of the milieu' and the 'public issues of the social structure' supports an understanding of how practitioners engaged in this process. Opportunities for dialogue and debate about their experiences in the 'milieu' enabled practitioners to problematize and explore the complexity of issues for Roma young people found within their own practice. This process gave visibility to the complex discourse and the intersection of such issues as racism and sedentarism enabling them to be named in practice. Through engagement with the narratives of injustice told by Roma young people practitioners connected the day to day experiences of discrimination visible in the 'milieu' with the legacy of systemic discriminatory prevalent in the 'public issues of the social structure'. Osler and Zhu (2011) argue for the strengths of narratives as tools to give visibility to the voices and experience of marginalised people; in this way they suggest that 'narratives fill the blind spots in the dominant discourse' (p.231). By moving beyond a position of contact with young Roma and listening to their narratives practitioners considered the issues for Roma informed by European, national and local perspectives (Robson, 2012). Such opportunities have the potential to build alternative responses (shaped by new knowledge) to the persistent and prevailing inequality experienced by Roma young people. In this way Roma young people can be re-positioned from the margins to the centre of practice. This moves beyond a view that in times of austerity and entrenched negative public discourse actions to address discrimination and inequality for Roma are constrained by views of available resources or a reliance on a funded approach to work.

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