

## Book review

**Derrington, C. & Kendall, S. (2004). *Gypsy Traveller students in secondary schools: Culture, identity and achievement*. Stoke on Trent, UK and Sterling USA: Trentham Books. (ISBN 1 85856 320 8)**

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“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 stop in a flower-laden meadow” (p. xi). This evocative image is contained in the Foreword to *Gypsy Traveller students in secondary schools*, written by a 14-year-old Traveller child called Tammy. When this image is juxtaposed with Tammy’s aspiration “that one day the travelling culture will be accepted” (p. xi), the book’s focus on Traveller education as the intersection of culture, identity and achievement becomes clear: educational achievement is linked inextricably with and derives from identity, which in turn must be understood in terms of the distinctive lived experiences of mobile communities.

The book is concerned with English Gypsy Travellers (although six participants were Irish Travellers), as opposed to fairground or circus people and new age travellers. Although Gypsy Travellers have lived in the United Kingdom since the 15th century, for most of the intervening period they have been marginalised and stigmatised, as they have been in other parts of the world (such as Nazi Germany). The basis of this discrimination is on account simultaneously of their ethnicity and their mobility, which in combination have evoked generations of prejudice and suspicion.

While Gypsy Travellers have proved remarkably resilient in practising their occupations and in handing down their cultural traditions from one generation to the next, their formal education provision has been seriously disadvantaged in comparison with other groups. In Britain, the Plowden Report in 1967 recorded a widespread mismatch between Gypsy Traveller needs and the available provision, a situation that had changed little by the time of the Swann Report in 1985. The 1990s saw the expansion of Traveller education services, funded by local education authorities, throughout the country to provide specialised support for Traveller children.

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the research reported in the book was intended as “the first national longitudinal study of Gypsy Traveller students in English secondary schools” (p. 1). It followed 44 English Gypsy and Irish Traveller students in 33 primary schools in 13 Local Education Authorities between February 2000 and December 2003 as they made the transition to Key Stage 3 (the period of early secondary education for students aged between 11 and 14), with interviews being conducted with the participants in different terms of Years 6, 8

and 9, as well as with parents and other relatives and with head teachers and teachers in schools and Traveller Education Services.

What the authors claimed as a “vast” array of data (p. 10) resulting from this research has been analysed and reported in nine chapters. After Chapter 1 outlines the study’s methodology and research design, Chapter 2 focuses on the primary schools from which the students have moved and parental hopes and fears for the transition to secondary schooling. Chapter 3 uses the vivid metaphor of “oaks and willows” (p. 44) to contrast attitudes to Traveller students exhibited by secondary school principals and teachers: respectively institutions that do not ‘bend’ and that expect students to fit in with them, and institutions that are prepared to be ‘flexible’ in order to accommodate multiple family contexts. Chapter 4 interrogates the role played by Traveller Education Services as “cultural mediators” (p. 68), implying the need for them to construct bridges between two separate worlds of home and school. Chapters 5 and 6 deal respectively with the cultural dissonance and the racism arising from the gulf separating these two worlds, manifested in such phenomena as ‘passing’ (concealing one’s cultural identity) and racist name-calling. Chapter 7 engages with “slipping through the net” (p. 135), when Traveller students ‘drop out’ of school, while Chapter 8 identifies some of the factors likely to help students to “[keep] on track” (p. 153) and remain at school. Chapter 9 draws the threads together by returning to and expounding upon the three intersecting themes of culture, identity and achievement. The concluding sentence is pessimistic: “...evidence from this study has shown that Traveller students are still under-achieving, are still more likely to be excluded and are still liable to encounter racism within the school context” (p. 183).

A lively feature of some of the chapters is the inclusion of case studies, which present vivid pen pictures of individual participants in the research. Most chapters end with ‘points for reflection’, detailed and sometimes provocative questions designed to encapsulate the developing findings. The book contains four appendices: the interview framework; the participants’ vocational aspirations recorded in each of three interviews; the students’ attainments at Key Stages 2 and 3; and the stated reasons for particular students’ having been excluded from school.

Chris Derrington and Sally Kendall are well-placed to have written this book: one had managed a Traveller Education Service, while the other had engaged in community work with Traveller women and children. Their deployment of qualitative and phenomenological research has resulted in a powerful text in which the participants’ voices figure prominently. Our only methodological quibble lies in the apparent vestiges of positivism in places, such as a concern for “[b]iases brought to the study” and a desire “to maximise an objective interpretation of the data” (p. 7) (as opposed to highlighting and celebrating all research participants’ subjectivities, including those of the authors), and a reference to the study’s “reliability as well as internal validity” (p. 10) (rather than to its credibility and trustworthiness).

Trentham Books has an impressive collection of publications about Traveller education in its lists. It is to be hoped that it will publish the book that we trust will emerge after the study's next stage of following the 44 students to the end of Key Stage 4 (for students aged between 14 and 16). After all, as 14-year-old Tammy noted:

I would like people to learn that our culture is important and that we respect their culture as much as they should respect ours. It is important for Travellers to go to secondary school to get a chance to have as much as everyone else. It is important that Travellers express their views along with other people and stand up and be heard so that they don't feel like outcasts. (p. xi)