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## **Engaging Gypsy and Traveller pupils in secondary education in Wales: tensions and dilemmas of addressing difference.**

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### **Abstract**

Despite decades of research and policy, we are still some way in the U.K. from ameliorating barriers for Gypsy and Traveller pupils. A complex set of factors exist which influence young people's engagement with secondary education. This interpretive-deductive study, which draws upon 'tensions and dilemmas of difference' (Norwich 2013), presents Gypsy/Traveller learners' perceptions and those of their parents and teachers about the barriers encountered. Findings around 'intra-cultural conflict' demonstrate significant tensions between and within cultures that are profound for young people during this stage of education. Resilient, supportive mothers and strong bonds with teachers and children from the mainstream community, appeared essential in helping young people to manage criticism and resist pressure to conform to cultural norms. However, a fundamental shift in societal attitude is required and critical thought paid to inclusive education, or young learners who remain in education may end up on the periphery of both societies.

**Key words:** cultural dissonance; gypsy/traveller pupils; inclusive education; secondary education

### **Introduction**

For decades there has been significant concern regarding the educational attainment of Gypsy and Traveller pupils within the United Kingdom (U.K.), acknowledged across a series of government publications (Department of Education and Science 1967; Department of Education and Science 1985; Department for Education and Skills 2003; Welsh Government 2014). Despite commitment towards raising outcomes for Gypsy and Traveller pupils, there is criticism that 'paper inclusion' (Ivatts 2005) exists for pupils with low social economic status (House of Commons Education Committee 2014); with Gypsy and Traveller children remaining at the margins of the educational system. National data suggests that persistent absenteeism, dropout rates and the underachievement of Gypsy and Traveller children is more pronounced than that of any other social group at every stage of education (Bloomer, Hamilton and Potter 2014; Equality and Human Rights Commission 2015; Derrington 2016; Welsh Government 2016). Gypsy and Traveller pupils are more likely to be categorised as having special educational needs, excluded because of their behaviour, leave school without formal qualifications and less likely to continue to secondary school (Bhopal 2011; Foster and Norton 2012; Office for National Statistics 2014). Thus, despite years of policy, there is a need for continued research into how far on we are from ameliorating the barriers faced by Gypsy and Traveller learners and factors which continue to make secondary education challenging for them. This paper, based on fieldwork undertaken in Wales (one of the four countries of the U.K.), draws upon '*tensions and dilemmas of difference*', a critical approach offered by Brahm Norwich (2013), which acknowledges the complexities associated with inclusive education. By adopting a more analytical stance, it is hoped this paper will contribute to developing educational experiences which are more meaningful, engaging and relevant to the needs of young Gypsy and Traveller learners.

Although the term 'Gypsy/Traveller' is used within this paper, it is done so with much reservation as it describes two peoples i) Travellers of Irish heritage and ii) British Gypsy. Finding an overarching term to describe the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community is problematic as it risks incorrectly portraying *multiple* and *diverse* communities as one homogenous group. Although shared cultural characteristics may include: high regard of the family and family descent; preference for family based learning and self-employment; unique forms of language; and commitment to a nomadic lifestyle, it is important to acknowledge the

distinctiveness of the Gypsy and Traveller communities (lifestyles, language, religious and moral beliefs), as well as recognising that some Gypsies/Travellers share values and experiences with individuals from settled communities (Lloyd and McCluskey 2008). The concept of culture is *extremely* complex, so to perceive cultural identity on the grounds of shared traditional customs and practices, is too simplistic. When two cultures co-exist, even on the peripheries of a shared education system, interactions of enculturation and acculturation are at play, which render ethnic boundaries permeable, and give rise to fluid self-ascribed and other-ascribed identities (Lloyd and McCluskey 2008). Shepherd and Linn (2015) explain how enculturation and acculturation interact at four different levels. 1. Low enculturation (rejection of the heritage culture), combined with high acculturation (acceptance and participation in the new culture) results in assimilation; whereby subcultures adopt traits of the dominant culture; 2. High enculturation (maintenance of the heritage culture), combined with low acculturation (rejection of the new culture) results in separation, whereby subcultures are separated into ethnic groups; 3. Low enculturation, combined with low acculturation results in marginalisation, whereby a subculture (or individual) risks becoming excluded from their heritage culture and new culture; 4. High enculturation, combined with high acculturation results in integration, whereby subcultures maintain most characteristics of their heritage culture while adopting traits of the dominant culture. As the results of this study will proceed to show, the requirement of secondary education and principles of inclusive education, may lead to various tensions for young Gypsy/Traveller learners, including dilemmas associated with enculturation-acculturation.

Gypsies and Travellers are reported as being one of the most disadvantaged groups in the U.K., facing significant inequality in the areas of accommodation, health, education, employment and societal prejudice (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2015). Education is highlighted as being the most important means of addressing marginalisation and social exclusion but only one in eight Gypsy/ Traveller children attends secondary school in the U.K. (Harding 2014). A complex range of inter-related factors, mainly associated with cultural dissonance, impact on pupil engagement. According to Wilding (2008), Gypsy/Traveller experiences of formal education are so fraught with conflict that the practice of sending children to school is something that without state legislation some families may be unlikely to do. Such cultural dissonance, Wilding (2008) claims, is a consequence of requiring Gypsy/ Traveller children to operate in an education system where norms, values and practices have been designed to cater primarily for white middle-class pupils from a settled community. So, in the quest to provide Gypsy/Traveller children with an inclusive education, critical thinking is required as to what really serves the interests and requirements of Gypsy/Traveller learners as seen from their *own* needs and perspectives rather than what is based on the plural values of mainstream society.

Primary education is generally regarded in a positive light by Gypsy and Traveller communities (Wilkin, Derrington and Foster 2009), with the number of children participating at this level rising (Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG] 2012). However, this is not mirrored within secondary education. As young Gypsy/Traveller people progress towards secondary school the intersectionality of culture, gender, class and religion, increasingly clash with the requirements of mainstream education and resistance and conflict are common reactions. Barriers which deter some young people and their parents from engaging with secondary education include: an ill-fitting curriculum (Cudworth 2008); low teacher expectations and negative attitudes (Foster and Norton 2012); a lack of understanding of the Gypsy/Traveller culture (Crozier, Davies and Kim Szymanski 2009); fragile home-school relations (Wilkin, Derrington and Foster 2009); parents who have had limited or poor experiences themselves as learners (Bhopal 2004); mobility issues linked to travelling (Devarakonda 2013); a fear of eroding the Gypsy/Traveller identity (Bhopal 2011), exposing children to bullying/racism, drugs, alcohol and girls to sexual relationships (Myers, McGhee and Bhopal 2010; Harding 2014; Derrington 2016). Perceived as adults from the age of fourteen, young Gypsies/ Travellers are expected to work, marry and become financially independent before the compulsory school leaving age of 16 (Bhopal 2011). The home and community are regarded as the main learning environments for children. Boys traditionally

follow in their father's career choice, whilst young women resume domestic roles within the home (Derrington 2016). Many Gypsies/Travellers view secondary education as de-skilling their children because it reduces integration into the family, diluting their knowledge of essential cultural, economic and practical skills (Harding 2014). Therefore, once a basic level of literacy and numeracy has been attained, many parents believe their child has achieved all they require from an education, leading to many dropping out before the ages of 13 to 14 (DCLG 2012; Bloomer, Hamilton and Potter 2014). Deviating from cultural norms, by allowing young people to stay at secondary school, can be perceived as a threat to group loyalty and result in an individual or family becoming estranged from the community (Levinson and Sparkes 2006). Such disapproval can unnerve parents who may be contemplating secondary education for their child. However, it is essential not to assume a single view of Gypsy/Traveller families and schooling, as there can be a sharp distinction of opinions among the communities and within individual families (Lloyd and McCluskey 2008). For example, the increasing urbanisation of Gypsy/Traveller families and global focus on women's rights is leading to the emergence of more radical ideas among some members of Gypsy and Traveller communities (Levinson and Sparkes 2003; Hamilton 2016).

Secure and respectful relationships have been found to be key to fostering 'familiarity, attachment and identity', key psychological conditions to establishing a sense of belonging to a place (Fullilove 1996). Consequently, the relationships that young people develop at school, is a pivotal factor in determining how they settle and progress. This is particularly the case for minority ethnic children (Hamilton 2013); secure attachments with teachers and peers has been found to positively impact on the attendance and retention of Gypsy/Traveller children in secondary education (Derrington 2007). Unfortunately, there is a tendency for some schools and teachers, even where inclusive ideology is core to policy and practice, to fall into adopting a cultural deficit model that problematises Gypsy and Traveller communities (Lloyd and McCluskey 2008; Devarakonda 2013). The fact that teachers find it easier to connect to academically-able and motivated learners (Corbett and Norwich 2005) and feel closer to pupils who demonstrate favourable attitudes toward school (Fumoto, Hargreaves and Maxwell 2007) risks putting Gypsy/Traveller children at a serious disadvantage. Derrington (2007) asserts that many Gypsy/Traveller children who withdraw from secondary school do so following a breakdown in relationships with their teachers. Gypsy/Traveller children's cultural behaviours are often misunderstood and/or seen as deviant (rude or confrontational) in a school context (Derrington 2007; Foster and Norton 2012). Where bonds with individual children fail to be established, teachers risk perceiving Gypsy/Traveller children homogenously. Such a view is detrimental as it overlooks the variations between children's cultures, gender, family stability, cognitive ability, socio-economic status and levels of personal resilience (Hamilton 2013). This may prevent teachers from recognising the abilities, pastoral needs and cultural heritage of individual Gypsy/Traveller pupils, resulting in further marginalisation and consequently disengagement from the learning environment.

Inclusive education, often defined in opposition to the medical or deficit model, has its basis in the social model of disability. Although it has become viewed as positive 'good for all' ideology, Norwich (2013), whose interest lies in the education of learners who have special educational needs, asserts that complexities and ambiguities arise when addressing the needs of diverse learners, which are frequently overlooked. At the root of many tensions are differences in assumptions about purposes of education, schooling (curriculum, pedagogy, worthiness and capability of different learners) and society (Nieto 2004; Norwich 2013). The individualist nature of pre-dominant Anglo-Saxon culture (Shepherd and Linn 2015), typically positions formal education in conflict with the collectivist principles of Gypsy and Traveller communities, which are based on a concept of interdependence and oriented towards *group* identity, needs, welfare and survival (Levinson 2008). The preoccupation with a performance driven culture (Cudworth 2008), where the accomplishment of middle-class white children is used to set the benchmark against which minority ethnic and lower income students are measured, is problematic (Banks 2016). Concepts and terminology arising from the dominant culture of performativity (for example, school engagement, attainment, outcomes, aspirations) contribute to stigmatizing various learners (not just Gypsy/Traveller pupils), rather than

focusing on the problems stemming from inequity in the education system and wider society (Banks 2016). Furthermore, assumptions that the cultural values and norms of mainstream education are 'right' and 'superior' often prevail. It is because of such contention that Norwich (2013, p.7) offers the concept '*tensions and dilemmas of difference*'; difficulties which surface are often in connection with the following principles: 'participation-protection; choice-equity; generic-specialist; what exists as real-relative; knowledge as investigation-emancipation'. Norwich (2013) stresses the importance of seeing connections between opposing positions, while recognising there may be continuing tensions, where final solutions are not found, only resolutions which may involve some balancing and trading between principles, according to context and perspective. Thus, there needs to be acknowledgement that values, practices and systems, which are based on mainstream society, may be irrelevant, in conflict or even disadvantage some individuals/groups. However, it is equally important to consider that current discourses of 'rights' and 'performativity', will encourage some young people from diverse backgrounds to take advantage of the different opportunities that become available to them.

Over the years, various strategies have been developed to address the needs of Gypsy and Traveller pupils in an attempt to promote school engagement. Strategies include: a key worker for the child and their family; a focused transition between the feeder primary and the secondary school; a flexible and relevant curriculum; specialist training for staff; systematic tracking and target setting of children's educational progress; first-day absence calls; rewards for attendance; teaching children of differing ages in the same class; buddying systems and nurture groups; a close school-Traveller Education Service (TES) partnership; engaging Gypsy/Traveller parents with the school; anti-bullying and race equality practice (Department for Education and Skills 2003; Myers and Bhopal 2009; Wilkin, Derrington and Foster 2009; Department for Education 2010; DCLG 2012). Despite these strategies, young people within secondary education still encounter conflict and difficulties.

## **Methods**

This small-scale exploratory study, which draws upon an interpretive-deductive paradigm, focuses on listening to young Gypsy/Traveller learners and their families; gaining insight into the perceptions held, experiences encountered and ideas they had regarding approaches that would best support them, academically as well as pastorally, within secondary education. The fieldwork, which was conducted during the autumn and winter term of 2015, was undertaken by *RP*, a manager of a TES in one county of north Wales (U.K.). *RP* has over 10 years' experience of working with the Gypsy/Traveller communities involved in this study. Eight Gypsy/Traveller girls and one Gypsy/ Traveller boy, aged 11-16 years, were interviewed (all were accessing secondary school, although of varying levels of attendance). Interviews were also held with seven Gypsy/Traveller mothers and three female teachers who represented three secondary schools within the locality. The gender imbalance should be highlighted as it might have bearing on data presented and conclusions drawn. Young male pupils and fathers were invited to participate but either chose not to contribute or were not available at the time of interview. As issues regarding the education of children are considered to be the mother's role in Gypsy/Traveller communities, and there is more acceptance for young women to remain longer in secondary education than young men, this is not unexpected (Hamilton 2016). It was felt interviewing parents and teachers would offer further insight into the complex experiences often encountered by Gypsy/Travellers learners who engage with this stage of education. The Gypsy/ Traveller participants were either of white English Gypsy or white Irish Traveller heritage. The sampling framework used to select the young people and parents was purposeful as efforts were made to reflect participants who were attending secondary school. The teachers were selected from schools where Gypsies/Travellers were known to be on roll. Before commencing the interview process, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, how their responses would be used, that data gathered were confidential and they were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

All nineteen interviews, which lasted between 20-45 minutes, were digitally-recorded. The anonymity of the participants involved has been safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms. The interviews held with teachers were conducted on the school premises, those

with mothers took place in their homes, whilst the interviews with the young people were carried out in their home, school or in a venue away from the community. Questions asked of the three participant groups were similar, resulting in a triangulated approach to gain multiple versions of parallel phenomena, in an attempt to more fully explain the complexities surrounding the secondary education of young Gypsy/Traveller learners. Questions related to: the value and purpose of secondary education; barriers to attendance, completion and achievement; support systems and relationships; strategies to encourage school engagement. Questions included: How do young people from the Gypsy/Traveller community perceive secondary education? What age should Gypsy/Traveller children finish education? Why do some Gypsy/Traveller children drop out of secondary education? What are Gypsy/Traveller children's relationships like with their teachers and peers? Is the Gypsy/Traveller community supportive of secondary education? What can be done to help Gypsy/Traveller pupils stay in education for longer? During the interviews, constant checks were made to ensure that what had been written captured the views of the participants. Where Gypsy/Traveller mothers had a low level of literacy, information was read out to them.

Data was analysed using general inductive analysis (Thomas 2006). Individual interview transcripts were read numerous times. The first stage involved collating individual responses under each open-ended question, coding respondents; highlighting ideas, thoughts, feelings, experiences which were related to the objectives of the study. The second stage involved noting recurring words, statements and patterns of meaning and then exploring relationships among these, leading to emerging concepts. Finally, the emerging themes were compared to the extant literature to determine relationships and alternative perspectives, giving rise to the development of key themes.

Limitations of the study could be associated with the interpretive-deductive approach adopted, the small sample and gender imbalance of the participants involved, and using a fieldworker known to the communities. These factors require consideration as they could have had impact on the validity and reliability of the research process. The interpretive-deductive approach means that arguments and conclusions are based on the statements provided by participants, which are *assumed* to be true, and which are at risk of being misinterpreted due to the researchers' personal, social and professional background (Thomas 2013). Furthermore, because of *RP's* employed position of authority, participants might have been inclined to say what they thought she may have wished to hear. Alternatively, because of the length of time *RP* had spent working with the communities and the trust she had established, participants may have been less guarded in their responses. However, this study does not claim to draw firm conclusions or offer generalised representations, rather the aim is draw upon a *specific* account to provide further insight into this complex area.

## **Results and discussion**

This section presents the perceptions and experiences of nine Gypsy/Traveller learners, seven Gypsy/ Traveller mothers and three female teachers. Listening to the issues and complexities faced by learners will help to provide educational experiences that are relevant and engaging and potentially lead to the development of strategies which may reduce some of the tensions arising from cultural dissonance. Through critical analysis of data, the following key themes have emerged: the values and aspirations young Gypsies and Travellers have about education; factors which make it difficult for young people to engage with secondary education and, strategies young learners and their families believe will enhance their experiences of schooling. Although there are some similarities between young people's views and encounters, a homogenous experience should not be assumed as extreme variations exist even among individuals from the same family unit. Despite the array of policy aimed at supporting Gypsy and Traveller pupils, a complex set of barriers exist which influence young people's engagement with secondary education. However, the strategies offered and conclusions to have emerged from this study are likely to be relevant to many 'underachieving' students, and are not specific to Gypsy and Traveller learners. Principles of inclusive education, such as extending scope to all; promoting fraternity; empowering the unfamiliar voice; encouraging active engagement in school life, contribute to 'tensions and dilemmas of difference' (Norwich

2013) for Gypsy/Traveller learners, their families and school practitioners. What is most notable is the degree of intra-cultural conflict that many young people are subject to as a result of continuing in secondary education. This study shows how, through their choice to adopt mainstream traits and take advantage of the different opportunities afforded, some young people (and potentially their family) are at risk of remaining on the peripheries of both societies.

### ***Education: values and aspirations***

Principles of equity and choice presented to young Gypsy/Traveller people within the education system offer new opportunities and diverse ways of thinking and doing. While inclusive practitioners will regard this positively, the tensions, dilemmas and disadvantage which may surface, require consideration. With regard to secondary education and compulsory attendance up to the age of 16, young people and their families were divided; five young people were supportive and four were negative. Learners who favoured education regarded secondary school as a means to progress to college and/or university and stressed the importance of mastering more than basic literacy and numeracy. These young people discussed how they hoped to gain good jobs in order to gain financial and social independence. Key characteristics shared by the young people who valued secondary education appeared to be i) a supportive mother and ii) good relationships with teachers and peers from the mainstream community. As evidenced throughout this section, the individualist nature of mainstream education (gaining formal qualifications for social and financial *independence*), goes against the collectivist principles of the Gypsy and Traveller cultures, putting individuals at risk of intra-cultural conflict.

I want to get GCSE's [General Certificate of Secondary Education] and A-levels. I want a different job than what a Traveller does, a job that will provide more money. (Patrick)

I plan to go to university and be a child psychologist. I like learning new things. I get bored at home. Everyone has the right to a full education for God's sake. (Shaunie)

The young women who valued education were keen to pursue careers rather than becoming housewives and mothers, whereas the young male's ambition was to make more money than he believed could be made from a traditional Traveller job. Much emphasis has been placed on the provision of vocational courses for Gypsy/Traveller pupils (Cudworth 2008; Bloomer, Hamilton and Potter 2014), however, this study shows how some young people are striving to achieve formal qualifications to open career opportunities outside the Gypsy/Traveller community. This serves as an important reminder that assumptions should not be made about the nature of the curriculum believed to be the most suitable for Gypsies and Travellers in secondary education.

The young people who disliked secondary education stated how it was an irrelevant stage which prevented them from fully engaging in the traditional practices of their community.

School gets in the way of my life. I hate the people and the place. I don't get the work. I don't need a career. I'm 15 now, I should be at home learning to clean not sitting in school. (Brit)

As explored within the next theme, common responses were given as to why, after the ages of 12 or 13, formal education was not considered to be appropriate for Gypsies and Travellers. The study showed significant tension arising from the cultural clash between family values and aspirations and those of the school, with young people often caught in the middle.

### ***School engagement and intra-cultural discord***

Another tension arising from inclusive principles is associated with the rights to participation and protection. This leads to philosophical questions about how the rights and needs of Gypsy/Traveller pupils are determined. As evidenced, the goal of a *full* educational experience



for pupils until the compulsory leaving age of 16 can enable some learners yet disadvantage others. Responses offered by participants centred on the complex cultural dichotomy which exists between the home, Gypsy/ Traveller community and the school. Various factors were identified as making the transition to, and attendance and completion of, secondary education difficult for Gypsy/Traveller learners. Many of these issues: racism/bullying; fears about exposing children to drugs, alcohol, bullying and sexual activity; the erosion of life and career skills essential to Gypsy/Traveller communities, are not new concerns, rather they have been widely documented (Myers, McGhee and Bhopal 2010; Bhopal 2011; Harding 2014; Derrington 2016).

There is considerable evidence that *bullying* and *prejudice* against Gypsy/Traveller pupils are main factors contributing to their poor attendance and behaviour, leading to high levels of exclusion (DCLG 2012). However, the participants within this study made little reference to prejudice Gypsy/Traveller pupils were encountering from members of the mainstream community. Teachers discussed how much work had been done in their schools to promote understanding of, and tolerance for, Gypsy/Traveller pupils. Eight out of the nine young people were positive about the relationship they had with their teachers; many referred to the high level of support they received with their school work. Only two young people discussed how they felt annoyed by teachers who negatively commented on their attendance and/or had misunderstandings about aspects of their culture.

We've worked hard to eradicate prejudice. We get very few incidents of racism. Difficulties stem from the Traveller children, some have real chips on their shoulders. (Teacher 1)

With regard to friendships, the young Gypsy/Traveller people were divided and demonstrated different levels of enculturation-acculturation in their social spaces. Four commented how they did not want to make friends with 'country children' (from the mainstream society) and mixed only with Gypsy/ Traveller children. Margaret represents a young person who is proud of her culture and not interested in combining aspects of the mainstream culture (high enculturation-low acculturation), which resulted in her remaining in a Gypsy peer/sub-group within school. One learner (Shaunie) described how a Gypsy/Traveller identity was sometimes used to maintain distance between, or even intimidate, mainstream peers. This may reflect the way some Gypsy/Traveller children deal with prejudice, inequality and feeling different within the social and academic spaces of their secondary school.

I don't want Gorge friends. There're like strangers. I'm not bullied, no one would dare bully me but Gorge just don't get Gypsy ways, so it's no use making friends with them. (Margaret)

Some Travellers use their identity as a strong point to bully other people. We expect to be treated equally but if they do that, we're not going to be. (Shaunie)

Unfortunately, all five young people who had developed friendships with individuals from the mainstream community discussed how they had been ridiculed and some ostracised by their Gypsy/ Traveller peers. Young people, such as Charity, who may have rejected their heritage culture (and Gypsy/Traveller friends) in favour of assimilating into the mainstream culture (low enculturation-high acculturation) are at risk of being socially isolated, particularly if they are not permitted to meet up with friends from the wider community after school.

I prefer non-Traveller friends. They include me after school, at weekends, overnight. But being a Traveller I'm not allowed. I have cut myself off from Traveller girls ... last time I went out with them they called me bad names in front of a group of boys. (Charity)



Most cases of bullying/prejudice appeared to be due to 'intra-cultural conflict', stemming from the decision to engage with secondary education and conform to mainstream patterns and expectations. Gender norms and commencing adult life earlier than many members of the mainstream community, seemed to be the main reasons causing young Gypsy/Traveller people to withdraw from secondary education. Although some young people will be resilient to such cultural expectations (Shaunie), others will reluctantly conform (Brit), whereas some individuals, as is their right, may make an informed decision to follow their culture (Rose).

Parents don't believe in Travellers having an education. Traveller girls are only born to get married, look after a man and have babies. Parents stick to tradition. It's not fair. (Shaunie)

I used to want to stay and found it hard when my family called me 'school girl.' Now I realise Travellers aren't meant to go to high school. You're seen as a country person. I won't need GCSEs, so I agree, I shouldn't be here... you're not proud of going against the culture. (Brit)

I don't need school. When I am 16, I will marry and my husband will look after me. (Rose)

The teachers discussed how many Gypsy/Traveller children became disengaged between the ages of 12 to 13. They attributed disengagement to: low levels of literacy and numeracy; late diagnosis of special educational needs; and intra-cultural disapproval, which often resulted in school withdrawal.

Many enjoy lower school but by year 9 they become disengaged. It's their culture as they're told from a young age they don't need secondary school. (Teacher 2)

The community pressures them to stop coming. Academic children are often ridiculed for being clever and non-academic children are told they're too stupid for school and need to work or stay at home. (Teacher 3)

According to Parker-Jenkins, Hewitt, Brownhill et al. (2007), it is Gypsy/Traveller men, more than women, who find adaptation most difficult and oppose change due to the fear of diluting their culture.

Dad says 'stop talking about school, you're home now, so pretend to be a Traveller even if you prefer to be a country person. You should be married, thinking about your wedding and trailer, not your homework.' But I'd prefer a non-Traveller life. (Shaunie)

However, female members may be equally grounded in traditional norms, influencing their children's level of school engagement (Parent 1). Some may have become used to their daughters supporting them with domestic and childcare duties or they may be concerned that their sons will be regarded as 'dossers' if they fail to learn a trade (Parent 5).

Education is the last thing on her mind. High school goes against our rules. She wants to be a woman, to be glamorous. I tell her how boys see Gypsy girls who go to school as a 'gorge' and they're seen as dirty. She sees girls of 15 getting married and having babies. She's copying, following the culture. She's 14, so by now she should be at home helping me. (Parent 1)

A key factor enabling the five young people, who were enjoying school, to remain in education appeared to be a highly supportive mother. The mothers, who were supportive of secondary education, claimed they wanted their children to: gain qualifications to open up non-traditional job opportunities; achieve a high level of literacy and numeracy and; mix with children from different backgrounds. They discussed how they did not want their children (daughters in

particular) to marry at a young age; some referred to their own restrictive or abusive relationships. These mothers also disclosed how they had had positive experiences themselves in secondary school.

I want them to stay in education as long as possible, to go to university to make a better life for themselves. If they leave at 16 they barely know anything. (Parent 2)

Many say 'why is she in college, she should be married.' I say she can marry at any age as long as she's pure. Why would I want her to marry? To be tortured and have children at 16? Marrying in the Travelling community means you're owned. I don't want it for my girls. (Parent 3)

Culture is important to me but I don't want be some stay at home wife having kids. Mum wants us to do something in life, she doesn't want us to have the life she's had. (Annmarie)

The decision to attend secondary education did not always come without consequences. As previously outlined, most parents and young people discussed intra-cultural conflict. Those who had continued to engage with this phase of education explained how they had to distance themselves from the community.

It's up to me if I send my child to school. But bullying from the community is hard, so I don't mix with the community. (Parent 4)

Bullying is bad, especially when I go on site, even from the young ones. They say 'little school girl, going to school at your age.' I try to ignore them but it's difficult. (Annmarie)

All children, regardless of their background, respond in a fight or flight manner when they experience difficulties in school (Parker-Jenkins, Hewitt, Brownhill et al. 2007). In today's climate, obsessed with performance and accountability, young people face increasing levels of stress. The number of young people seeking counselling over exam stress has increased by 200%, with worry over education one of the main causes of mental ill-health for children (Adams 2015). Thus, if there is disapproval from family/community members or doubt that mainstream employment will later follow, why would young Gypsy/Traveller people continue to contend with such demands? The excerpt below shows the dilemma faced even by parents who are supportive of secondary education.

Our kids can go right through school but they won't get a job in town because they're a Traveller. If a Traveller girl didn't get anything after going to college she can marry and be looked after but if a Traveller boy went and didn't get a job, he wouldn't know a trade, how to do an honest living without robbing. If a boy can't do a trade he's called a dossier. (Parent 5)

Intra-cultural conflict is the most significant influence on young people's schooling, yet there are also tensions between cultures once they leave school and have to fit in one or another culture. This creates a paradox for policy-makers and practitioners who endeavour to keep Gypsy/Traveller learners in secondary education. What is the justification of subjecting young people to such social and emotional pressure by insisting they remain in education if they are to be later blocked from employment opportunities available to the majority population? Unless there is a fundamental shift in societal attitudes, including challenging discriminatory practice by employers, inclusive philosophy may exacerbate the difficulties faced by Gypsy/Traveller people. The decision to remain in secondary education may lead to young people becoming socially isolated from one society or both (Hamilton 2016).

### ***Strategies to promote engagement***

The engagement and retention of Gypsy/Traveller learners is a complex situation, with slow improvement over the years. It is because of such limited success that emphasis was placed on seeking the views of the young people and their parents regarding strategies they believed would promote these aspects of schooling. Inclusive principles of providing specialist approaches to address difference should involve listening to individual Gypsy/Traveller pupils regarding their needs to determine what is *real* and *required* due to the complexities which can arise. Strategies offered by the young people included: a reduced timetable; more culturally/vocationally relevant subjects; college days; increased one-to-one support and more education welfare officers.

Full-time doesn't work for our community, so if you were allowed to do two days a week, then your parents might let you stay for longer. We need courses we will use when we are older instead of subjects like Welsh, which will be useless to me. (Mary)

Pay us (laughs) and find things that'll keep us interested. Days in college are the best. (Patrick)

There should be more people making sure all Travellers are in school because the ones that aren't show off on Facebook and bully those that go. It's not fair. (Selina)

Although a reduced timetable and vocational subjects were seen by many participants as being a better fit with cultural expectations, the young people who wanted to complete formal qualifications and attend college/university, acts as an important reminder not to make assumptions about the educational aspirations of this diverse group of learners. Furthermore, young people who, because of their engagement with secondary education, were facing abuse from their peers within the community were frustrated about the inequity arising due to inefficient systems for monitoring attendance.

Parents suggested similar strategies to those offered by the young people but also proposed: an all Gypsy/Traveller school; separate classes for sex education; asking young Gypsy/Travellers what they want from school; improved communication with teachers; more appropriate forms of discipline and; supporting their children to cope with anti-school comments made by the Gypsy/Traveller community.

Gypsy children should come out of class for one-to-one help or the other kids will think 'thick Gypsy asking for help.' Even better would be an all Gypsy/Traveller school. (Parent 6)

Ask the kids what they want to do. Tell them not to listen to other Traveller kids who don't go to school. The bullying can get really bad. (Parent 4)

If the child is misbehaving teachers should speak calmly and understand them instead of roaring or our kids will roar back. They don't always handle our kids in the right way. (Parent 7)

What is evident is that some teachers fluctuate between working towards an inclusive set of principles, trying to overcome the deficit model, albeit sometimes on the terms of the dominant culture (Teacher 2: 'I've seen a big journey for some children integrating with *our* social norms') while at times reverting to deficit ideology regarding the Gypsy and Traveller cultures (Teacher 1: 'Difficulties stem from the Traveller children....some have real chips on their shoulders' and 'more prosecutions are needed'). Teachers prioritised the need for increased funding to support Gypsy/Traveller pupils and called for more prosecutions to tackle absenteeism. However, exclusions and prosecutions should be avoided where possible as they risk reinforcing the Gypsy/Traveller community's perceptions that it is not worth going to school and of the social injustices encountered by its population (Lloyd and Mckluskey 2008).

More prosecutions are needed, once you've done one it gets round the community and gets children in school. (Teacher 1)

One teacher noted a positive generational change.

I've seen a big journey for some children integrating with *our* social norms, really enjoying school. Kids don't always get a choice about whether they stay but their generation will change things... (Teacher 2)

However, some participants believed that no matter what strategies were implemented, it was the family unit which determined children's engagement and progression.

If the family don't want them there, it makes it hard for them to stay, no matter what you do to try and change things. (Charity)

Various strategies are offered have already been identified within other studies as being effective for supporting Gypsy/Traveller pupils, such as: a reduced curriculum, which includes a vocational element; a link worker for children and families; rewards for attendance; regular tracking and analysis of progress. This study champions the use of these approaches but has identified a lack of guidance about how practitioners can help children and families to cope with intra-cultural conflict. What is also important is that the educational experience offered and strategies employed meet the needs of *individual* Gypsy/Traveller learners. Without careful consideration, specialised/differentiated practices, which single learners out (e.g. a reduced timetable and separate classes), may exacerbate issues such as social isolation and bullying to become stigmatising and humiliating rather than inclusive and enabling.

## **Conclusion**

For many decades various initiatives have been introduced to address the needs and raise the attainment of Gypsy/Traveller learners. Yet, a complex set of multiple factors, including differences of ethnicity and gender, conflict with the principles and practices of mainstream education, impacting on the physical, emotional and mental space (Marcus 2015) of young Gypsy/Traveller pupils. Efforts will continue to be made to encourage Gypsy/Traveller children to embrace the opportunities available to them within mainstream education. However, in so doing, certain considerations must be acknowledged. This study has shown the problematic concept of inclusive education; the common assumption that inclusion will benefit all and alter the status quo in society, when schools are subject to wider political and social structures and processes. So it is proposed that new critical thinking relating to seeing and doing inclusion are required, where tensions arising from addressing difference (Norwich 2013) are carefully considered, limits acknowledged and what is 'truly inclusive' for individuals questioned.

Attempts to attain inclusion and equity are extremely complex and may inadvertently result in negative outcomes. The Gypsy and Traveller children in this study, by being offered choices presented by the mainstream culture, risked intra-cultural conflict, social isolation and the dilution of skills for a life within their community. As is the case for all learners, it is important not to assume that 'one size fits all' for Gypsy and Traveller pupils, for even children from the same family unit will have different needs, experiences, aspirations and support networks. Some young people, as is their entitlement, will want to learn the traditions and occupations of their community, whilst others may desire the right to a *full* mainstream education. This study shows a number of young people who were happy, ambitious and achieving within this phase of education. Some young women, by questioning their purpose in life, wanting more than marriage and motherhood, were starting to challenge long standing cultural values, roles and expectations within their community. However, without addressing the discriminatory attitudes and practices that exist within the employment sector, young people whom continue with their education risk later being disadvantaged and unemployable within their own and wider community. So, young Gypsies and Travellers whom regard secondary education as something which puts their life on hold, something which prevents them from

undertaking the role/s required of them in their community, might have additional cause to retain traditional norms and roles. Offering a vocational curriculum is often seen as a solution for Gypsies and Travellers, as the skills developed are considered to have more use within their communities. However, this risks disadvantaging young people who are striving towards higher education. A reduced timetable for Gypsy/Traveller pupils may appear to strike an appropriate balance between family/cultural requirements and state expectations to complete compulsory education yet it can restrict social networking and single out learners as being different. Young Gypsies/Travellers may invest in friendship groups with mainstream peers and as a result become excluded (perhaps ostracised) from relations with members from their own community. If they are not permitted to mix with their non-Gypsy/Traveller peers beyond the school gates, they risk becoming socially isolated.

It is essential that practitioners and policy makers are aware of the emotional and social pressure potentially experienced by individuals whom choose to deviate from cultural norms. Intra-cultural disapproval and bullying from more traditionally minded community members can create significant anxiety and hurdles for Gypsy/Traveller learners and their families, leading to disengagement and withdrawal from secondary school. The intra-cultural findings, which reinforce the validity of Western conflict theories focusing on self-interest vs. other interest, was a central and recurring theme throughout the study, leading to one mother requesting that teachers help young people to develop coping strategies. In an attempt to address the prejudice that Gypsy/Traveller people are often subjected to by the mainstream community, the complex situation of intra-cultural conflict has somewhat been overlooked. This is an area warranting further investigation. More understanding is required of the strategies used by young people in their fight to make change; how they cope with criticism, harassment and resist pressure to conform to cultural and gendered norms. If school practitioners are cognisant of external and internal inequalities, as well as cultural and family priorities/obligations, which may put pressure on young Gypsy/Traveller people (Hamilton 2016), they can use this understanding when attempting to foster relations and identify strategies to support learners, particularly those who wish to remain in education.

This paper presents an important argument for a fundamental shift in mainstream attitudes towards Gypsy/Traveller pupils, with a view to improving their experience of secondary education and enhancing their employment opportunities. Given the insufficient progress in achieving greater inclusion over the years, the arguments presented need to be persistently rehearsed until better progress is made, for without so doing Gypsy/Traveller people will continue to experience conflict, marginalisation and inequality within education systems and wider society. As called for by the Welsh Government (2014), to understand the ways in which barriers can be minimised requires up-to-date and detailed accounts of good practice in engaging young people and their families. It is believed that this study makes a contribution to that goal. Instead of perceiving Gypsies and Travellers as individuals who need to be *empowered* to express their opinions this study has shown young people who have strong, articulate voices. It may be that practitioners and policy makers simply need to *listen* to hear the voices of Gypsy and Traveller learners. Rather than deficit ideology, which positions Gypsies and Travellers as 'deviants', 'underachievers' and 'others' (Cudworth 2008; Bhopal 2011), people from these communities need to be acknowledged as *equals*; individuals who function within cultures and structures that are different as opposed to 'better' or 'worse' than mainstream culture. Perhaps this approach will better determine the needs and barriers Gypsy and Traveller pupils have during this stage of education and the strategies they believe will support them to engage and progress within secondary education, if indeed this is what they wish to do. Furthermore, engaging in such dialogue may result in reciprocal learning where mainstream culture could benefit from some of the principles held by the Gypsy and Traveller communities.

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