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The imagined educational futures of mobile cultures through children and youth voices

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Mobile cultures, across the United Kingdom and Europe, continue to experience widespread discrimination in their daily lives (Lloyd and McCluskey 2008). Due to transient lifestyles and tentative relationships with schools and services, children and young people from these communities have few opportunities to share their views on important issues that affect their lives. This article spotlights the children and youth from European Roma and Gypsy/Traveller communities who have collaborated with the Centre for Mobile Cultures and Education, University of Edinburgh, over the past two years. These youth rarely participate in research and their voices remain marginalised in Scottish society.

The Romani people arrived in Europe from India over 700 years ago and are thought to be the largest ethnic minority in Europe. Most Roma families (European Gypsies of Romani descent) have travelled with the aim of finding work and to seek a good education for their children. The origins of Scottish Gypsy Travellers may be linked to Romani Gypsies and Irish Travellers in addition to distinct routes of their own. In some cases, Romani people mixed with indigenous groups in Scotland, some of whom may also have had nomadic traditions.

According to Amnesty International (2011), systemic discrimination is occurring against as many as 10 million Roma living in Europe, including failure of authorities to cease the segregation of education for Romani children in certain countries (Open Society Foundation 2012). In the UK Department for Education's 2010 report, Wilkin et al. (2010) confirmed that Roma and Gypsy/Traveller students have lower levels of achievement than do other ethnic groups during all key stages of education, and concluded that this resulted from a complex

group of barriers to accessing the curriculum, such as high exclusion rates, interrupted education, and negative experiences of school.

Our research works toward addressing current imbalances in representation and contribution of mobile cultures in all aspects of public life, including education and employment, by supporting their participation in services and civic society through democratic, dialogic and creative approaches. The research involved 20 children and young people ages 6-16, from European Roma and Gypsy/Traveller communities across Scotland (UK), in projects exploring education and identity. We gave considered attention to the ways in which the children and young people's participation in our research encouraged their visibility in the wider community. With the support of artists, translators and teachers, we facilitated the groups to articulate and reflect on their experiences of education in culturally relevant ways. Drawing on their preference for oral, visual and kinesthetic modes of expression and learning, we used storytelling, visual methods, and digital technology to support the creation of personal e-books, self-portraits, and iPad walking narratives. Through these methods, layered landscapes allowed an embodied and reflexive process providing space to share experiences of different social worlds.

We found that many Gypsy/Traveller youth expressed strong Traveller identities: "We're Travellers, and there's more Travellers [in the school]" (David, 7). The young people shared an awareness that they, or their lifestyles (such as mobility and residing in a trailer) were viewed *by others* as different – resulting in a disconnection to non-Traveller staff and peers: "Well it's normal to us...innit?!...But different - maybe - to everyone else. The people - they're just annoying. The way they talk and things" (Jennifer, 14). This heightened awareness of 'difference' calls for educators to scrutinise how the characteristics of a sedentary education system contributes to a Traveller's identity and sense of belonging. If these are indeed common

feelings experienced when entering formal settings, we can begin to understand why these youth feel that formal education is not for them. Traveller youths expressed more positive views toward learning when it clearly linked to their futures: “It’s good to have an education...so when you’re older you can get a better job” (Thomas, 11); “As you’re growing up...you really do need to read...for your driving...how to pay your bills” (Katrina, 14). Nevertheless, most Gypsy/Traveller youth did not attend formal schooling.

The Roma group had clear ideas about career paths, concurring that school played a vital role. Sophia (10) explained: “I’m going to buy a car...and I’m going to be a singer! School teaches you about money...and helps you learn”, while Camila (7) revealed that “I want to be a doctor...school helps you learn, write, read, to count, and speak English”. All the Roma children attended elementary school and were positive about their school experiences and transitions to further education.

Our findings show that there is a need for initiatives to explore how these pathways can be made more relevant for mobile cultures, and address the common feeling of ‘other’ when entering formal settings. We posit that two central issues can assist in achieving this. The first is the relevance and accessibility of the curriculum. For example, the content and learning approaches must reflect mobile lifestyles, values and experiences. Many are coming from a setting that has almost no written language (low family literacy levels and traditionally an oral culture) to a setting that revolves around the need to be literate. Practices such as the use of multimodal content, distance learning, and experiential learning opportunities should be considered. Rather than assimilating these communities to sedentary learning systems, schools must work toward delivering an education that resonates with geographically fluid and culturally rich communities.

The second issue relates to pupil *voice*. Many are the first in their family to attend formal schooling. Scottish Gypsies/Travellers often withdraw children from school at an early age as a way of maintaining their culture and lifestyles, while Roma families may not have experienced schooling due to historical practices of exclusion and segregation from education systems. However, more recognize the benefits of formal qualifications and literacy to access a wider range of jobs, and as a route out of poverty. Understanding this generation's motivation to learn is necessary. They should understand the power of a "critical" voice (Hadfield and Haw, 2001) that can challenge existing practices and contribute to educational decision-making. However, change may never happen unless schools adopt new methods where mobile pupils know that their 'critical' voices are listened to and have influence. Teachers must facilitate processes, value pupils' ideas, *and* challenge them so that they understand their own views in relation to others. The education system must acknowledge that youth are negotiating new and unknown contexts and relationships, even before any learning can happen. The most important thing they can do is support these processes.

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