Over the last 30 years or so neo-liberal informed policy has underpinned the development of a school system based on the performance of teachers and children. Consequently, the school environment has increasingly reflected dominant discourses around ‘managerialism, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability and performativity’. The ‘representational space’ of teachers and children in schools’ has ‘changed beyond all recognition’ (Turner-Bisset, 2007:193). Drawing on the idea that the school is a socio-spatial landscape and ‘one of the most significant’ institutional spaces children engage (Foley & Leverett, 2011:29), we can understand forms of educational inequality as a consequence of spatial production. This paper contributes to the emerging literature which suggests that the spatial dimension of education is increasingly important in analysing the reproduction of individual identities and social inequalities.

Using spatial theory (particularly that of Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1989, 1996)) this paper examines the overlapping relationships of spatial production including: spatial practices of teaching and learning; representational space in terms of policy discourse, and finally, spatial representations in terms of the daily experiences of school life. The particular emphasis of this paper is to examine the stories of people’s schooling experiences in order to investigate how schools shape, have shaped, and are shaped by the ‘structures’ and ‘landscapes’ of the education process as well as the social practices and interactions of participants. With a particularly focus on Gypsy/Traveller experiences of school, this paper examines the particular situation of children from these communities and their unique relationship with the schooling system and education more widely.

The data on which this paper draws reflects a range of perspectives gathered from three main ‘interest’ groups. These three ‘interest’ groups consisted of professionals working ‘inside’ schools; those working ‘outside’ schools alongside Gypsy/Traveller communities and finally the communities themselves. A mixed methods approach was adopted. Data comprised three focus groups (which loosely represented the three main interest groups) and twenty-three one to one semi-structured / unstructured interviews across the interest groups. Small scale ethnography was also used by way of participant observation in two English primary schools.

The research finds that teachers and some schools are able to adapt practices to support the inclusion of Gypsy/Traveller children. This however, is within a context of the socio-spatial landscape of neo-liberal schooling. Putting space at the centre of analysis enables us to see how alternative spaces might be created in which children from Gypsy/Traveller communities feel accepted and equally accommodated.