FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE: THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF GYPSY/TRAVELLER GIRLS IN SCOTLAND

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The ESRC and the Scottish Government jointly provided funding for a doctoral research project at the Moray House School of Education that broadly aims to enhance an understanding of the experiences of Scottish Gypsy/Travellers, with the ultimate intention of informing policy and practice (McCluskey and Riddell, 2011). One aim of this study, therefore, is to analyse the longstanding status quo of the apparent inability on the part of government agencies and public services to provide for the needs of sections of Gypsy/Traveller communities.

Research by Wilkin et al (2009) indicates that Gypsy/Traveller children are the lowest achieving minority group in the United Kingdom. As other studies attest, the perception that Gypsy/Traveller children are underachieving academically is a major concern (Cemlyn et al, 2009). My exploratory case study will address a gap in the literature by ‘re-presenting’ (Spivak, 1988) the personal stories and explanations of a sample group of girls from Gypsy/Traveller communities. As a former Headteacher, I have a particular interest in analysing how the education system in Scotland provides for its marginalised minorities. This doctoral study’s exploration of their experiential accounts of education and schooling will provide an original contribution as the girls’ voices are largely missing from the scholarly literature and policy documents.

My study is principled on the dialogic participation of both researcher and researched (Freire, 1972). The data from in-depth interviews analysed using Charmaz’s (2006) grounded theory approach, together with the critical analysis of structural or institutional evidence, combines two processes to try to explain, improve understanding and produce knowledge. The researcher actively constructs analysis using a range of analytical tools, negotiating as one progresses, to re-present the narratives of both the minor and major players in these circumstances, which also includes the reflective voice of the researcher. I argue that this multidimensional approach will create a deep understanding of this complex social and cultural phenomenon.

There are several key challenges: Gypsy/Traveller girls may be deemed ‘vulnerable’ because of their community’s minority status, the sensitivity of the topics that will be exposed for discussion, and ensuring the safety and well being of the young girls, ‘in the face of uncertainty, risk and moral complexity’ (Backs, 2007: 97). The measures taken to ensure a sound ethical approach in the face of the challenges involved will be potentially of interest to BERA members, as will the findings of the research.