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Gypsies, Travellers and Roma in UK Higher Education

A View from Inside the Academy

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Abstract

Written from the unique perspective of a Romany Gypsy graduate (Smith) with the support of academic colleagues (Greenfields/Rochon), this chapter draws on a Gypsy Roma Traveller GRT learner journey from the point of starting as a mature student with caring responsibilities to the present day as a postgraduate student and early career researcher. Thus, the narrative is able to foreground the voice and personal experience of a GRT author as well as initial findings from ongoing research pertaining to the higher education experiences of Gypsy Roma and Traveller (GRT) students. The dialectic between intentionality and outcome in the higher education (HE) sector is explored, highlighting the significant challenges faced by the GRT community in engaging with HE, such as the place and value of education, and the gendered expectations of community members. It is suggested that ongoing work with HE featuring partnership with the GRT community and beyond, including Showmen and Boaters (GRTSB), may offer a positive opportunity to guide change, and in doing so become 'the change we wish to see.' In particular, it is proposed that universities commit to a good practice pledge that involves monitoring GTRSB student and staff numbers; building a supportive and welcoming culture for GTRSB students; outreach and engagement to local GTRSB communities; and inclusion celebration and commemoration of GTRSB cultures and communities.

Keywords

Gypsy Roma Traveller - Higher education - Transition - Engagement - Commitment - Partnership

Introduction

This chapter is written from the perspective of a Romany Gypsy graduate (Smith) embarking on a new stage of their learner journey as an early career researcher and M.A. Education student. Produced with the support of academic colleagues (Greenfields/Rochon), it considers Smith's experiences in higher education (HE), beginning with her background and entry as a mature student with caring responsibilities. Accordingly, the chapter considers the learning and development of the graduate-turned-academic colleague working in a research assistant role, drawing in findings from ongoing research while reflecting on the commonality of experience amongst her community members. The unique combination of ongoing research findings and personal experiences illuminates often-hidden struggles that the Gypsy Roma and Traveller (GRT) community face in engaging with HE.

GRT values are strong and steeped in a rich cultural history. Education, or more specifically education qualifications, are not seen as a proxy for intelligence. In Smith's words:

I grew up in the borders of London/Herts. When the site closed, my extended family of Romany Gypsies moved in to allocated community housing.

We were fortunate: we could read and write. My dad had taught himself as an adult using comics. My mum had been schooled in a convent, and she had taught us before we even started school. My primary school was small and there was at least 5% that were Gypsies. Unusually for someone from my community, I finished school with a handful of poor General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs¹).

¹ The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is the standard end of

It was not that I wasn't clever enough to do better, just that it was not needed or valued.

Smith's personal experiences are suggestive of the often complex, but highly representative, reasons that have contributed to GRT communities' exceptionally low participation rates in HE. An estimated 3-4% of GRT members aged 18-30 were studying in HE in 2014 compared to 43% of this age group in the overall population (Mulcahy et al., 2017). In real terms, this equates to no more than 200 students from these communities in this age range being in HE at any one time in the UK (Greenfields, 2019, citing Freedom of Information data from 2018 obtained by The Traveller Movement NGO).

The barriers to higher education faced by the GRT community are numerous. There are often significantly lower literacy skills than surrounding populations (Women's and Equality Committee, 2019) associated with disrupted education. There is also a lack of familiarity with HE and reduced cultural capital as a result of having parents who may not be literate or familiar with the concept of further and higher education; coupled with the often negative experiences of education, this enhances a sense that 'College or University isn't for us' (Greenfields, 2019; Forster and Gallagher, 2020). Particular to the GRT community are the gendered and cultured expectations of early marriage and childbearing in the late teenage years, and associated caring roles (typically female) and income generation responsibilities (typically male); community responsibilities; and norms pertaining to 'a good job for a Traveller' (Greenfields, 2008). Each of these factors can act individually or together to dissuade community members from engaging with HE. As Smith explains:

I am the oldest child of the oldest son, so I had responsibilities and a role within our small community. I cared for my siblings, supported

compulsory educational assessment practice. There is an expectation that children will 'pass' at least five GCSEs at Grade C/Level 4 or above. Achieving these grades are a requirement to transition to higher level education (A – or Advanced Levels, the standard exam route to Higher Education) or (generally) to apply for an Apprenticeship or most entry level employment opportunities.

my nan and great aunt next door and I went with them often instead of school to sell heather and trinkets around London. Us girls were actively being taught a trade, how to barter, communicate, sell, and observe. This has served me well in life, but my mum was kind of strict about school, and she fought with my dad's family to make sure that calling work was weekends and holidays or after school until I got expelled at 14. She made me go back to another school out of the area to try and get us away from the racism in our town for Travellers. It didn't work.

Generations of our women have always reared and raised children, hawking² and selling our wares to complement the man's income. I expected no different, and no different was expected of me.

A key barrier for the GRT community is the appallingly high levels of racism. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission (2009) and Parliamentary Women and Equalities Select Committee (2019) suggest that prejudice against GRT communities is the 'last acceptable form of racism.' In academic settings, this may mean that students are reluctant to self-identify as members of the GRT communities (Clark, 2004; Greenfields and Smith, forthcoming).

Together, the cultural expectations within the GRT community and the lack of societal support act to deter participation in HE. Where GRT students do enter HE, this may result from resilience and happenstance. This was the case for Smith:

My path to HE was not planned. I gave a lift to an education worker from a Traveller NGO from London to Wales. In those three hours, she had me convinced I should apply for the course she had just completed at [the university where she studied]. So, I did. I applied on the Monday morning, and I was accepted on a youth and community degree.

² Selling door to door or in public settings such as on the street

Though this chance encounter represented a way into HE for Smith, there must be structures in place to facilitate participation from those in the wider GRT community. Moreover, the activity undertaken by universities must extend beyond increasing entry rates: there must be corresponding action to provide an inclusive environment that enables those students to flourish. As per Smith's experience:

I hated the essays, the reading, the formed structured areas. I did not understand the format or referencing or how to upload or access books online. I was teaching myself all of this, familiarising with laptops, software and intranets alongside my course. It was hard.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have provided access but been less willing to make accommodations in shifting its own identity. This is particularly evident in the area of assessment. While it is well established that making assessment more meaningful, purposeful, and authentic may have a positive impact on learning (Sambell et al., 2013), more traditional formats persist in being overly represented. Academics who choose essays as a method of assessment must acknowledge that bright and able learners may be disadvantaged if their background and educational experiences have not familiarised them with the expectations of this format. There is a strong argument for halting the privileging of 'essayist literacies' which, either wittingly or unwittingly reproduce existing inequalities, hierarchies, and power structures and actively disadvantage what might be described as 'non-traditional' student-writers (Lillis, 2001, p.51). In order to move forward, HEIs must make space for learners to be visible and valued in their assessed work through the diversification of assessment practices.

Beyond the course of study, other prominent features of the HE experience may also serve to exclude those from the GRT community:

True to form, I did not engage with my fellow cohort much. I travelled in and did not socialise. I did not reach out to student unions or learning support. I am a Gypsy. I don't want to seem as stupid as everyone presumes. Like I should not be here, doing this. Education is my right. I have to remember that.

In Smith's experience, success has been in spite of, rather than because of, a sense of belonging. Established theories of engagement and retention suggest that the more involved students are within the institution, the more likely they are to stay and succeed (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993 & 1975). Like the issues themselves, solutions must be multifaceted to ensure that specific challenges faced by the GRT community are not addressed in a reductive manner; there is no single action that can be taken by 'the university,' 'the academic,' or even the GRT student.

The Sir John Cass Foundation commissioned report into widening access for GRT students (Atherton, 2020) concluded that at present, HE does not appear to be engaged in addressing participation of those from GRT communities. In response, there is a need for a joined up, co-constructed approach with the GRT community, including specialist Non Governmental Organisations (NGO), working in partnership with the HE establishment. To this end, activities aimed at encouraging HEIs to tangibly illustrate their commitment to this work have already commenced in recent months; these include an examination of inclusive practices and curricula content as well as meaningful anti-racist engagement through mechanisms such as supporting peer mentors, community asset mapping, and developing support networks and peer resources (Greenfields, 2019; Greenfields and Smith, 2020; Greenfields and Smith, forthcoming research report). The activities have been identified through research and evaluation undertaken with GRT graduates, students, and potential students. Together, they provide a sustainable means for co-working in order to address (often negatively) racialised identities of GRT learners and improve access and participation for the wider GRT community. These varied approaches may thus attend to and actively support the often complex and varied needs of individuals.

New ways of working: creating the change we wish to see

Smith is one of a small percentage of GRT students who has completed a degree qualification. Even more unusually, she has gone on to

postgraduate study and taken a role as a researcher examining the ways in which HE's engagement with the GRT community can be improved. This means that Smith is in the unique position of both informing change and 'being the change' through research.

Initial findings and personal experiences suggest that, together with making environments welcoming generally and embedding opportunities to explore 'self' through the curriculum, there are real opportunities to drive meaningful change. Considering the specific challenges faced by the GRT community and individuals within the community, a targeted approach is needed. Hearteningly, there are ample opportunities to draw on existing literature, and increasingly more established practices on working in partnership with students in order to progress this work. Seen in perspective, working in partnership with students is still relatively new; the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the organisation that sets and monitors standards of delivery in higher education, initially set out requirements on engaging with students in 2012, recognising partnership as an important feature of this process (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012). Nonetheless, its introduction has resulted in a growing body of research into student-staff partnerships, contributing to a context that increasingly recognises the need to include the student voice. Research and outreach on how the GRT community may be engaged with HE must not be *about* the GRT community, but *with* the GRT community.

Any activity, however well-intentioned, must avoid unwittingly placing additional pressures on GRT students. As in Smith's case, taking a leading role can bring unwelcome pressure:

[By my second year of study], I had been asked to deliver sessions on GRT to the new students as part of a module on race, and to students on the education programme. This meant that future youth and community workers on my course and those studying education would go out into the working world with knowledge on us. I enjoyed the discussions, but I wasn't an educator. I should not have [had this responsibility]

When working with students from the GRT community (and by definition, other small and marginalised populations including Showmen and Boaters), it is critically important that co-producing responsive and ethically engaged praxis offers both a practical and morally engaged way of enhancing inclusion within HE. To this end, the research team have deliberately engaged in a series of collaborative activities to enhance practice and support the development of an inclusive environment for GRT students. Importantly, these activities have been supported at the highest level of institutional leadership.

A central feature of activity, now in the process of being shared across other HEIs, involves modelling a collaborative approach located around a 'Good Practice Pledge'³ in supporting GRT students (see below), which is explicitly aimed at creating a sense of institutional 'belonging' (Thomas, 2012). Whilst tailored to GRT communities, this approach has close synergies with the widely endorsed Universities UK guidance (2019) on supporting other minority populations in a number of ways. As part of the Pledge, universities are asked to commit to its four strands:

1. Data monitoring of GTRSB student and staff numbers;
2. Building a supportive and welcoming culture for GTRSB students;
3. Outreach & engagement to local GTRSB communities and
4. Inclusion, Celebration and Commemoration of GTRSB cultures and communities

The Pledge, which is under consideration for adoption by a number of universities at the time of writing, has attracted wide-spread approval, not only from community members but also NGOs, academic policy agencies, and universities who may have struggled to find appropriate information or guidance on best practice on how to ensure that GRT students can most effectively access and thrive in HE.

Change will be difficult, as it requires commitment to a process which is both dialogic and co-produced. Post-secondary organisations, and HEIs in particular, must accept their responsibility to lead without dominating.

³ <https://bucks.ac.uk/about-us/gtrsb-into-higher-education-pledge>

Each party brings different sets of knowledge, understanding, and experience to the table. None of these sets of knowledge should be prioritised or seen as more important than the other in creating a 'workable' and inclusive model of practice. It is time to create inclusive counter-narratives and throw open the doors of the Academy to all those who want to learn.

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