

Chapter 13

Travellers in Time: A Critical Dialogue with the Gypsy Travellers of Lancashire Alethea Melling and Yasmeen Ali

Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage.
(Freire, P, Education for Critical Consciousness 2007, p. 33).

Introduction

The Traveller Communities of Lancashire are predominantly Romany and Irish. Their culture and language are oral rather than written. This not only limits the communities' ability to access services, but also limits their ability to articulate their views and to understand their rights. This chapter seeks to explore how Freire's pedagogy and the rich and colourful Traveller tradition of storytelling can be used successfully to engage the Traveller community in the production of a creative yet critical monologue which will facilitate not just 'reading', but reading their own reality and the development of a hopeful praxis. Moreover, it explores how the act of dialogue is an act of sharing a gift, the gift of education. In this chapter, we discuss how a group of undergraduates formed a learning community with the Travellers and how this became a vehicle for a new knowledge, leading to understanding, trust and respect.

The Traveller community in the UK is complex and made up of a number of different ethnic and social groups. The generic term is Gypsy Travellers. This group consists of, first, Romany Gypsies, who have been recorded in the UK since the fifteenth century. They were originally referred to as Egyptians because of their dark complexion. It has been suggested that this group originated in India and moved into Europe, although this assertion has been contested by Okley and others (Clark, 2006, pp. 24–26). This ethnic group has been persecuted since the Middle Ages through purges and, more recently, through the genocide inflicted by the Third Reich (Clark, 2006, pp. 24–26). For example, in the time of Henry VIII in England, it was a capital offence to fraternise with Gypsies. Indigenous Travellers in the UK are Irish (Minceir) and Scottish Travellers (Nachins) and Welsh Gypsies (Kale). There are records indicating there were nomadic communities in Ireland centuries ago (Clark, 2006, p. 15). Added to this group are travelling show people and New Age Travellers. The former work in the travelling entertainment industry, such as fairgrounds and circuses. The latter consist of people from the non-nomadic community who are seeking an alternative lifestyle, often an environmentally sustainable lifestyle. Both these groups are usually well educated, the show people because they have to manage complex businesses, and the New Age Travellers because they are often from highly educated backgrounds seeking an ethically sound lifestyle for themselves and their children. However, the community that forms the basis of this study is that of the Irish Travellers.

The Cultural Context

Irish Travellers have a lot in common with Romany Gypsies in the sense that they both have an oral rather than a written culture. The Romany speak Roma, which is derived from the Indian Sanskrit, and the Irish Travellers speak Shelta, which is a vernacular based on old English and Gaelic. Both these communities are Christian, although there is a Muslim Roma group in Eastern Europe (Education of Roma Children in Europe, 2013). The Irish Travellers are predominantly Roman Catholic, but there is a growing Evangelical Christian influence within this community. The Irish Travellers have very strict unwritten codes of behaviour around family and gender roles. They live in extended families and tend to practice consanguineous marriage, although this practice is not as predominant as it once was. Nevertheless, it is still unusual for a Traveller to marry a gorgio, or outsider. Travellers marry young, usually in their teenage years, and have large families. Sex outside of marriage is forbidden and young women are expected to remain chaste. The women stay at home to look after the house and the children and the men usually are self-employed in the construction, landscaping and recycling of metals industries. Their work often takes them around the country from

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place to place. In order to preserve their culture, it is usual for the Irish Traveller community to remove their children from school at about twelve years old. The girls will then help their mother at home and the boys will start work with their father and other male relatives. The community fears that outside influences may lead their young people into unacceptable forms of behaviour such as drug use and promiscuity (Clark, 2006, p. 213). Recently in the UK, this community has been the subject of a reality television show, *Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (McNally, 2011). Many Travellers, including those who are the subject of this chapter, regard the programme as a gross misrepresentation of their culture.

Traveller culture is very passionate, emotional and often physically violent. Children are strictly disciplined and both young men and women are expected to stand up for themselves. This behaviour manifests itself in the popular Traveller sport of bare fist boxing. Young boys are encouraged to box from an early age and the Traveller community have been criticised for participating in and organising child fights. Bare fist boxing, originally associated with Victorian fairgrounds, is illegal based on the grounds of health and safety, but it still continues as an underground movement, serving a significant illicit gambling industry. The Channel Four programme *Gypsy Blood* documents this sporting culture, looking at boxing as an expression of honour and masculinity within the Traveller community (Maguire, 2012). When Traveller families, or 'clans', fall out, altercations are brutal and can lead to fatalities. When such a feud is taking place, Traveller sites are unsafe for outsiders to visit. These extreme aspects of the Traveller culture are recreated by the popular media as images of deviance.

Traveller communities fall outside of what Antonio Gramsci referred to as the 'dominant culture' (Jones, 2010, pp. 27–40) and adopt a lifestyle that is in many ways a challenge to the hegemony: rejection of a formal education where young people are indoctrinated with the values of the dominant culture, and a nomadic lifestyle. In 1924 social philosopher Mary Parker Follett discussed the denigration of diversity in her comments on conflict: "What people often mean by getting rid of conflict is getting rid of diversity, and it is of the utmost importance that these not be considered the same. We may wish to abolish conflict, but we cannot get rid of diversity. We must face life as it is and understand that diversity is its most essential feature. . . . Fear of difference is fear of life itself" (Parker Follett, 1924, p. 300). Parker Follett's considerations on the question of conflict and diversity and Gramsci's view of the ongoing negotiation of power between the state and the citizen are both interesting here. The state as the dominant culture ensures the acquiescence of the dominated through the provision of services, such as health, welfare, protection and so forth. In order to access these services, minority communities must at least assimilate the central values of the dominant culture through the state education system and acquire the tools, such as a permanent address, literacy, numeracy and ICT, to access the services. As Ryder also notes, policy and practice in these areas assume a level of assimilation and that is why they fail (Ryder, 2010, pp. 56–60). Those marginalised from the dominant culture through poverty, illness and, in this case, through culture cannot access the services effectively as they do not have the necessary human capital (Keeley, 2007, p. 10). Travellers therefore have some of the worst records of health, neonatal survival and adult life expectancy of any ethnic group (James, 2007, pp. 367–388). This is particularly pertinent for antenatal care, as many Traveller women do not get the health checkups that are available to the wider society (Clark, 2006, pp. 192–194).

The Pedagogy

The pedagogy employed must be sympathetic to valuing diversity and addressing the fear of difference. The University of Central Lancashire was asked by the Traveller Education Service to help develop the literacy skills of the young people on the site through student mentoring. In his work *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Paulo Freire (2007) discusses the concept of extension and its linguistic connotations. This concept has significance for this process, where the university students

had been asked to 'extend' literacy skills to the Travellers. It is very important in any truly authentic pedagogic process to avoid the negative connotations of extension. Freire notes that words form a 'linguistic field' within a 'conceptual field', thereby 'expressing a vision of the world they reconstruct'. Freire suggests that linguistically and therefore conceptually, the term extension, regardless of the context, held negative connotations: 'It appears that the act of extension, in whatever sector it takes place, means that those carrying it out need to go to another part of the world, to 'normalise it' according to their way of viewing reality: to make it resemble their world' (Freire, 2007, p. 89) This act of extension, whereby the students bring their technical knowledge to the Traveller community, 'must involve a relationship between human beings and the world, so as to make human beings better equipped to change the world'. Otherwise, 'the concept of extension which is characterised by the transference of techniques and knowledge is in direct contradiction with a truly humanist outlook' (Freire, 2007, p. 88).

The project posed a significant challenge. First, the Traveller community is notoriously closed and secretive. Travellers do not trust outsiders, referred to as gorjio. Owing to centuries of discrimination, the Traveller community have developed what Ryder (2010) describes as a strong 'bonding' form of social capital that allows the community to function exclusively, with little linking to the dominant culture. There were concerns as to whether or not barriers to engagement could be broken and an inclusive learning community established. Freire stated, 'Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage', and it was through acts of courage on both sides that this learning community of young Travellers and university students developed (Freire, 2007, p. 33). Interaction required a humanising approach that would allow participants (staff, Travellers and students) to remove their outer armour of preconception, prejudice, mistrust and otherness, and to enter the dialogue as fellow human beings, with love, openness, tolerance and curiosity.

In her opening address to the 2012 conference 'Paulo Freire: A Global Legacy', Nita Freire talked about a hopeful praxis: how individuals and communities, if they engage critically and authentically in ethical and political struggles, can 'ultimately transform' where they live (Freire, 2012). By using a pedagogy sympathetic to Freire's philosophy,¹ we worked with the Traveller community and university students to develop a critical monologue that facilitates reading their own reality through what Colin Lankshear refers to as a 'humanising model of functional literacy' (Lankshear, 1993, pp. 111–118). Lankshear's discussion of domesticating versus liberating literacy is important here and to acquire such requires a similar pedagogy. A domesticating pedagogy demands that the student assimilate the dominant culture, whereas a liberating pedagogy allows students to develop a functional literacy, allowing them to pursue a humanising and hopeful praxis. This moment of praxis was most poignant in the creative monologue of a young Traveller whom we will refer to as Mary:

My name is Mary, I am 25 years old. I travel around places.
I am protesting against the banning of Travellers.
I dream that Man can be peaceful. I want Travellers to be more wanted in cities. I can hear people. I can smell nature and horses. I can touch fences and walls.
I remember when things were different. I am afraid of fairs ending. The best day of my life was when I didn't have a care in the world. The worst day of my life was full of worry when the law started.
I am brave, blonde, married and funny. The object I can't live without is my phone.
It is the day of the fair. I am protesting because I feeling frustrated. I am worried that I will say the right thing to bring the Travellers to Freedom. Will I do the right thing?
Will I be a role model? Will I be a voice for the Gypsies?
I am trying to be a voice for the future Travellers.
If it weren't for the King then fairs such as Appleby and Cain Bridge wouldn't exist. Racism often goes on throughout the Travellers' communities, such as being accused of shoplifting and stealing and are hated for their background and religion. (Mary, 2012)

Unlike other ethnic minorities, the Traveller community does not ambitiously seek to be represented within the power structures of society such as politics and the law. A lack of human

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capital, namely, education and political alliances, and a low level of social capital outside of the immediate community make it difficult for Travellers to access services that support equality. Therefore, Travellers are almost routinely discriminated against in ways that would not be tolerated by any other ethnic group. Mary recalled trying to enter a well-known department store with her children when the security guard stopped her and said, “We don’t want Gypsies in here as you will be thieving everything”.ⁱⁱ If the security guard had said, “We don’t want Blacks, Pakistanis, and Indians”, he would have been dismissed from his job on grounds of racial discrimination. The young woman said she had never stolen anything in her life, but this was not an isolated incident, but just part of the ongoing struggle the community had to endure to be accepted (Traveller, 2012). Travellers are a socially excluded group, with little access to redress.ⁱⁱⁱ

Developing a critical monologue necessitated developing critical capacity within the learning community. To develop a critical capacity, it was also necessary to engender a democracy. Freire believed that a lack of opportunity for concrete participation in democratic processes, through social exclusion, oppression and other forms of marginalisation brought about by the dominant culture, results in an ingenuous approach to dealing with social and political issues: ‘The less critical capacity a group possesses, the more ingenuously it treats problems and the more superficially it discusses objects’ (Freire, 2007, pp. 88-89). An important aspect of this pedagogic process was to create a democracy within what had become an eclectic learning community of adults and children, university students and Travellers, Muslims and Christians, Indian, Somalian, Pakistani, Irish and white British. The first act of courage was to cut through differences and seek common values. This sense of common understanding within the learning community was epitomised when we asked: What can Travellers teach the world? The Travellers believed that they could teach the world valuable skills in respect, modesty, living as a community, family and culture. Interestingly, they identified a strong affinity with Muslims in terms of values and behaviour. Moreover, they wished to teach the world that Travellers are not ‘bad people’, and that “we are human beings” (Mary, 2012). The latter point reflects how the Traveller community often feel that they are treated as sub-human by the dominant culture.

The question what can Travellers teach the world? immediately reverses the process of anti-dialogue that the dominant society has used to ‘educate’ the Travellers for centuries. In the words of Stanley Aronowitz, ‘The locus of the learning process is shifted from the teacher to the student’ (Aronowitz, 1993, pp. 8–9). From this simple dialogue it is possible to identify a number of important areas where the Traveller community can inform the dominant society. Successive governments and policy makers have sought answers to the question of cohesive communities, the respect agenda, family, sustainability and culture. Here is a community that prides itself on faith, family, respect, the environment and heritage. Moreover, it is a factor that is distinctly lacking in the dominant culture: humanity rather than neoliberal pragmatism.

The university students underwent a transformational experience as part of this project. They were subjected to humanity at its most authentic. The interaction between the Travellers was emotional and passionate, and at a level of intensity that the university students had not experienced. In a pragmatic education system, emotionality in the classroom is discouraged, even though it is through emotional references rather than reading books that we learn (Freire N., 2012). The passion and the physicality of the Traveller community initially disturbed the university students, as the Traveller young men in particular did not respond to the students’ idea of what is ‘normal’ classroom interaction. The young Traveller men also had issues regarding the university students, as they had little interaction with groups outside of their community and were suspicious as a form of self-preservation. To begin with, both groups behaved with some hostility toward each other. Nevertheless, the learning community worked together on forging an initially fragile democracy, which formed the basis of developing critical capacity within the learning community as a whole. Over the period of the project, both the

university students and the Travellers moved through a really humanising process from an ingenuous attitude toward each other to a collaborative capacity for critical thought.

Conclusion

In his dialogue with Ira Shor, Freire agrees that a teacher must be an artist. Shor is referring to a need to recreate the visual and verbal aspects of the classroom and to shift passive learning to active learning. Shor seeks a colourful, vibrant and dynamic learning environment (Shor, 1987, p. 117). The process of education needs to be a work of art, created by the whole learning community. Never has this been as pertinent as when working with the Traveller community whose language, culture and heritage are built upon expression and emotionality. In order to engender the reading of reality, we worked with the oral tradition of storytelling and engaged the group in expressing their reality through fiction. An example of this is a short monologue by a young man whom we shall refer to as John:

John the Slave Boy.

My name is John. I am ten years old, I am on a big smelly ship. I am on the way to the Caribbean to be a slave. I am frightened in case I get killed and never see my family again. I dream of dying because I would rather be dead than be here. I want to be able to see my family again though. When will I see them? Will I ever see them again? I can hear banging, shouting, crying, squealing, coughing and sneezing. I can smell Pirates, rats and sweat. I can taste the smell of mice and bodies. I remember getting hit with a sword. I can see guns, people bleeding and injured. I am afraid of getting killed; what if I get thrown into the rivers and drown?

The best day of my life was just being with my family.

The worst day was when I stepped on to the ship and my life changed, then I got hit with a sword.

I am good looking, skinny with a six pack and scars on my body. Life as a Traveller is terrifying because we were slaves, we were tortured we were threatened; we got beat up. An old-fashioned gun once shot me.

John's narrative is rich and vibrant. An oral culture with a strong emphasis on storytelling encourages a colourful and highly sensual vocabulary within the Traveller community. He is using storytelling as a way of dealing with his sense of otherness and identification with an oppressed minority, in this case a slave boy. Through this process, a ten-year-old boy is able to push through an ingenuous mind-set to read his own reality. This is a child with apparently 'low levels of literacy', but a deep love of words and the ability to create physical sensation through narrative. This is a child who underachieves at school and will probably drop out in a couple of years. Yet this is a child with a mature and sophisticated level of emotional intelligence. The most powerful aspect of this process is that it is not a technique 'extended' to the Traveller community by the hand of the University; it is the Travellers' own process which they have been able to share with the University students in a moment of collaborative conscientisation. The next step is to develop the critical monologue into a radio play for a wider audience.

This project was in fact a product of a failed assimilation process within the dominant education culture. As Ryder points out, the mainstream system does not attempt to accommodate the learning needs and aspirations of this ethnic group (Ryder, 2010, p. 52). Although the Report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (recommendation 67)^{iv} emphasises the need for a curriculum that values cultural diversity, and recent movements have been forged to ensure the inclusion of minority cultures within educational provision, these 'improvements' have bypassed the Traveller community. According to Clark (2006), in contrast to other ethnic minorities, there has been little input by Traveller communities into the development of the curriculum. Clark believes the reason for this is the rigid and inflexible education system rather than cultural reasons (Clark, 2006, p. 225). Moreover, many Traveller young people are racially bullied at school in ways that would not be tolerated by any other minority group. In the foreword to the governmental paper *The Inclusion of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller Children and Young People*, Lord Adonis, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State

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Schools, UK, commented that ‘for far too long society has shunned people from these communities. This has resulted in their growing mistrust of authority and many generations not having a good education’, thus leading to social marginalisation (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2008, p. 1-3). In his article ‘The Gypsies and Social Exclusion’, Andrew Ryder elaborates on Adonis’s point discussing how Traveller communities are excluded from ‘the benefits’ of mainstream society (Ryder, 2010, pp. 52–60). Despite the rhetoric on inclusion and human rights, Traveller communities continue to be excluded from education. During the project, the Traveller young people worked on their critical monologues, asking the question: What if I ruled the world? The most popular answer was to ban school.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Nita Freire stated that Paulo Freire hoped that students would 'not repeat, copy or recreate, but use as a reference' (Freire, N., 2012).

ⁱⁱ In his work on integralist narratives and redemptive anti-Gypsy politics, Michael Stewart explores how the dominant culture establishes a cultural connection between Gypsy Travellers and criminality. Stewart discusses this in the context of the Hungarian Roma community, but his comments have a resonance for the manner in which the wider society perceives Gypsy Travellers: 'The cultural arguments which establish an inherent connection and inviolability as to the nature of gypsies, and present certain traits as normalised are, needless to say, dangerous as they serve the process of social habituation among the majority' (Stewart, 2012, p. 58).

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Ryder defines social exclusion in this context as a denial of access to a range of life chances and opportunities caused by structural inequalities. He goes on to say that exclusion can be reflected 'not only in material inequality, but spatial, institutional and political exclusion. It is a consequence of a complete rupture with society' (Ryder, 2010, p. 56).

^{iv} The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry was initiated as a response to accusations of institutional racism within the police force following the murder of young black student, Stephen Lawrence in 1993.