EDUCATION FOR A MARGINALISED COMMUNITY: GTRSB, SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract - This paper is part of two series that will be presented at this conference. This article will focus on interventions co-designed and implemented by a university, and the Gypsy Traveller Roma Showmen and Boater (GTRSB) community that can support a community. The research shows that the university's ability to engage with the communities it espouses to represent was achievable and sustainable only when members of those communities were not merely consulted but central to decision-making about and participation in intervention design, delivery, and evaluation. This paper highlights the challenges (time-intensive) and benefits of subduing the expert voice of academia associated to create meaningful community relationships.

Keywords - Education, Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, Showman and Boaters, Inclusion, Higher Education

I. INTRODUCTION

Gypsy Traveller Roma Showmen and Boaters (GTRSB) are diverse, heterogeneous populations scattered across continents as varied as Europe, North and South America, Asia, Australia, and Africa [1]. In the European Union (EU) alone, Roma is estimated to number between 10 to 12 million [2]. Many members of these diverse populations have maintained aspects of a shared culture since the 11th and 12th centuries [1].

The adoption of the term 'Roma' 'showman' 'gypsy' and so on represents a significant milestone in the emancipation of each group and the rights that they have been striving for; nonetheless, its usage is not unproblematic. Some communities, for instance, those who ascribe as Gypsy and/or Traveller in the UK, feel that the term 'Roma' has been imposed on them by European structures [3]. Other critics believe its frequent use is partially responsible for perpetuating the stereotypical image of 'Roma' as a homogenous group. So, while using the abbreviation 'GTRSB' is not unproblematic, whatever form it takes, it purports to encompass a given set of identities. However, this 'fixity' may lead to excluding those who may identify only partially with any of the labels. Despite these critiques, the abbreviation GTRSB is used throughout this paper to reflect how the research participants self-identified.
People of GTRSB heritage are underrepresented in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom. Only 3-4% of the GTRSB populations aged 18-30 years access HE compared to 43% of 18–30-year-olds in the general population [4]. Research evidence [5-7] strongly suggest that even where individuals from GTRSB groups do enrol in university, many feel invisible and unwelcomed and are concerned about unconscious bias, lack of institutional knowledge about their status as ethnic groups, or fear exposure to racist stereotypes about their communities if they self-identify.
The paper titled Friend and Foe: The Intersection of Precarity, Social Capital and Life Chances for the GTRSB is a critical literature review, while this paper focuses on the interventions used in the research.

Our questions, focused on the GTRSB UK Community, are:
Can social bridging capital be created between educational stakeholder groups and a marginalised community?
If so, can social bridging capital mutually benefit stakeholder education groups and a marginalised community?
If a mutually beneficial relationship is possible, how can the symbiosis between the two be sustained?

II. METHODOLOGY

Our community-based participatory research (CBPR) pedagogy led us to utilise the case study method [8], focusing on the GTRSB UK community. CBPR's roots lie in Freire's [9] pedagogy and emphasises partnership with a desire for equal access to decision-making, goal-setting and action [10]. Inherent in the title, community-based research relies on the community's voice and focuses and nourishes the community's priorities, navigating and shaping decisions that influence community members' lives. Insider research underpins our behaviour. However, traditionists might argue that only one of the team is an insider researcher, born a Showman, sharing a particular characteristic [11] and a member of a group [12] can be deemed an insider researcher. However, the researcher would acknowledge the challenge of this conclusion as they only have knowledge of one of the GTRSB communities. Whilst the other two researchers would be deemed outsider researchers, their philosophical community-led approach and long-standing community research will provide

insight. Through this lens, the researchers share how qualitative research, CBPR pedagogy, and serendipity led to the development of interventions to help bridge social capital [13] within the group and HE.

The interventions we share developed organically, relying in part on serendipity for all involved (see table 1).

This findings section will be shared in an anachronistic order commencing with our starting point in 2016, as follows: 1 Starting out with Roma, 2 Building inter-disciplinary support, 3 Creating a national platform for Roma and 4 Bridging the gap in education for the GTRSB community, as follows.

III. FINDINGS

Intervention 1 Starting out with Roma

In 2016, we formed two Local Stakeholder Groups: Liverpool Roma Employability Network (LREN), formed of Roma, employers, academics and others in Liverpool to focus on adult Roma employability and the second stakeholder group, Roma Education Aspiration Project (REAP). The context for the research for intervention one was Liverpool, a city that is in the top five poorest in England [14] and comprises a high proportion of low-skilled work [15]. In Liverpool, work for the marginalised communities is often via labour market intermediaries [16]. While working with the Liverpool Roma community, we found differences in some organisations' professionalism, e.g., paying below minimum wage [17], and found a range of poor practices among the labour market intermediaries used by the Roma. We discovered that Roma commonly found work via friends or family, for example, those who had contacts with a labour market intermediary or, in rare cases, an organisation, as outlined in our paper Harrison, Collins & Bahor [18].

The Liverpool interventions were only possible due to the engagement with the Liverpool Roma Community Worker, Mercy (a pseudonym), at a local Liverpool NGO, who supported our access to the community [19]. Mercy describes herself as an activist who supports her community. Our paper Collins, Harrison & Palasinski (2020) shares Mercy's journey. [20] The REAP project raised the aspirations of young Roma and challenge barriers that thwart their potential. As part of the REAP intervention we used Motivational Interviewing (MI) [21] to develop Roma Champions. The Roma Champions attended a two-day training course led by a qualified Consultant Clinical Psychologist. Their role was to engage the community and help individual members make change. For the Roma champions training was a new experience.

Our third intervention was an Employability/Education event hosted at the University. 95 marginalised individuals and Fifteen organisations joined the event. Fifty participants attended CV workshops, and 26 created a CV. The event was unique - none of the contributors and participants had ever experienced one like it before. Levitica, a former big issue seller, wanted to inspire her children and make her 'dreams come true' by securing a job and training. The event challenged some expectations of the Roma being 'work-shy' as illustrated by attendee 1, who shared how they 'did not expect so many (Roma)'. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with 100% agreeing that they found the event helpful and that it developed their knowledge about employment and employability. The qualitative feedback was positive, with one participant stating, 'I have a CV!' and personal recognition in the quote 'I have skills!'. Furthermore, one of the participants from the REAP project joined the LJMU undergraduate programme and now has a job in HRM after securing her degree in 2022 [22].

Intervention 2 Building Inter-disciplinary support for wider GTRSB community

In 2021, we developed an interdisciplinary GTRSB working group at our organisation, including professional and academic LJMU staff, to increase their access to HE and to achieve the GTRSB pledge. The GTRSB pledge is designed to support more GTRSB students to go to university and, once there, to participate fully in university life [23].

The group connects the university stakeholders with FE, High Schools and the local community. GTRSB students share a strategic place. We have/have had student representatives from the Showman, Roma and Traveller community's showman. The GTRSB students are at the core of the group. Mercy, the community worker is also an active member of the group. As a result, GTRSB lives, history, and voices have now permeated many aspects of university life, including open days, conferences, curriculum development, knowledge sharing. The benefits, to GTRSB students and the ripple effect to others, is significant, as expressed by Grace, (pseudonym), a Romany gypsy student:

'There shouldn't be any hidden voices in higher education - anywhere, really; but when there is, it is universities like Liverpool John Moores that are showing the way forward. They give you a step up and support you, and they do not want you as just a token. LJMU see you as a person, and you should be no less.'

Another LJMU Law Roma student shared their perception of the benefit of this partnership intervention and the positive ripple effects on local communities:

'In my studies at LJMU, the partnership work was more than a one-off. It was a partnership journey of supporting and learning from each other to be able to find ideas and projects which can be visible not only in academic environments but in communities too where they can reap the benefits.

Intervention 3 Creating a National Platform for Roma

We have been working to develop a UK National Roma Network (UKRN) via three community organisations in the United Kingdom – two in England, one in Scotland and one in Wales and two UK Universities. The purpose of the group is to support the UK Roma community.

We undertook an extensive consultation process to understand the needs of the Roma community. Our consultation led to two data collection points: a survey in July 2022 and a decolonial mapping process group with Roma in May 2023 and December 2024. The survey included feedback from 20 UK regions and identified the need for an organisation to represent migrant Roma in the UK [24]. The feedback from the Roma community members in the mapping process was for the UKRN to (i) challenge or assist in alleviating "Racism"; (ii) provide support in building a capacity for self-reliance and self-confidence, (iii) create and increase opportunities to build bridging capital. The mapping process also recommended the need for Community Champions specialising in specific issues, i.e., education, domestic violence, LGBTQIA+ issues etc., able to work between groups and individuals in the network and link individuals to existing services in an area.

Intervention 4 Bridging gap in education for GTRSB community

In 2024 St Hugh's Primary School, St Francis of Assisi, Archbishop Blanch and Liverpool City College were the first to sign the GTRSB Pledge in the Northwest of England. In 2023, LJMU signed the GTRSB Pledge in Higher Education. Initially designed by Buckingham New University, the pledge started its implementation in higher education in 2019. LJMU signed the pledge to improve access, retention, and outcomes in education for the community. The pledge focuses on four key areas:

Data Collection

Organisational and Institutional Culture

Outreach

Inclusion, Celebration and Commemoration

The pledge signatories encouraged and supported by this project signify a dedicated effort to create an inclusive environment and support the educational needs of GTRSB students of all ages. Signing the pledge fosters a more inclusive educational environment, including developing a inclusive curriculum and promoting cultural awareness. Moreover, it addresses GTRSB student's specific challenges. Promoting awareness and understanding of the community culture and histories through educational initiatives and events and encouraging respect and appreciation for diversity.

Each institution in this project has provided a dedicated testimony. Their written testimonies have much in common as they commit to meeting the needs of the Liverpool GTRSB community, without prejudice, where GTRSB pupils can flourish, thrive and shine.

Liverpool GTRSB Celebration – Moving Together

On 17 June 2024, LJMU hosted a GTRSB Celebration Event, which attracted over 200 attendees. The event brought together students, community members, educational institutions, and local authorities to celebrate the achievements of the GTRSB community. It sought to raise awareness of the GTRSB issues within the broader academic and local communities. The event provided a platform for fostering collaborative efforts to address the challenges and opportunities the community face. Two further events were held in March 2025 for staff, students and local secondary school GTRSB pupils.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our interventions have helped the GTRSB acquire bridging capital through networking with others beyond the kinship group that can enable them to achieve. Our CBPR approach allows participants to see their part in the push-pull of driving and restraining forces that promoted or hindered their development. Nevertheless, there is still much to be achieved as this group, sadly, continues to suffer significant discrimination in the UK with weak educational attainment driving their poverty and work opportunities.

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