

Traveller, Nomadic and Migrant Education

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**Edited by Patrick Alan Danaher,
Máirín Kenny and Judith Remy Leder**

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

First published 2009
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in Sabon by IBT Global.
Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free paper by IBT Global.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Traveller, nomadic, and migrant education / edited by Patrick Alan Danaher, Máirín Kenny, and Judith Remy Leder.

p. cm. — (Routledge research in education)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Children of migrant laborers—Education—Cross-cultural studies. 2. Nomadic peoples—Education—Cross-cultural studies. I. Danaher, Patrick Alan, 1959–

II. Kenny, Máirín. III. Leder, Judith Remy.

LC5151.T73 2009

371.826'918—dc22

2008049323

ISBN10: 0-415-96356-7 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-87867-1 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-96356-5 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-87867-5 (ebk)

*For our families, who make us what we are,
with love, affection and gratitude.*

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Foreword

Educating Migrants: A Model for the World

Jean-Pierre Liégeois

Throughout history, and even through the middle of the 20th century, nomads, itinerants and migrants were seen as marginalised, a threat, outside the social norm, living an outmoded life. The desire to control these groups, and an ethnocentric belief in social evolution, led to the effort to assimilate them into the majority population. Education and social work were viewed as the perfect vectors for this assimilation. Because moving from place to place was considered an obstacle to schooling, the political project was to settle the nomads for the 'good' of their children. The high-mindedness of the end concealed the error of the means, and the nobility of the purposes masked the vice of the forms of educational provision.

From the 1980s onwards, a desire to affirm cultural realities was allied with a wish to achieve the 'integration' of marginalised populations. This alliance drew on the development of an intercultural education, the idea for which had been devised about 15 years earlier but had not been applied. It was in this context that in 1984, in the Member States of the European Union (EU), the first transnational study of the education of Gypsy and Traveller children was conducted. Five years later, on the basis of this critical study, the Ministers of Education of the EU adopted an innovative Resolution based on an approach that took account of culture. One of its first sentences stresses that the "culture and language [of Gypsies and Travellers] have formed part of the [European] Community's cultural and linguistic heritage for over 500 years". The text then proposed initiatives respectful of this concept, aimed at improving the conditions of a difficult area of education. At the same time, the Ministers adopted another Resolution concerning the education of children whose parents move from place to place for professional reasons: fairground workers, barge dwellers and circus employees.

Also in 1989, UNESCO organised for the first time a "meeting of national experts on the conditions of schooling for children of mobile groups". Participants from Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Kenya, Sudan, Mali, Mongolia, Peru, France, Spain and Hungary were asked to share their experiences. The group concluded:

A first for UNESCO, this meeting confirms the anxiety of this Organisation to take on the problems in order to fight against exclusion. . . . As

far as education policies are concerned, questions remain about consulting with travelling peoples and the possibilities of adaptability, as well as about the transition from macro to micro-planning. Would the response not be easier if it was admitted that a country is comprised of diverse populations? . . . Travelling peoples have a way of life which must be taken into account.

Thus it was proposed that schools, teaching materials, teachers and their training should adapt to embrace the variety of the cultures of the pupils. Schooling was seen as a source of equality for all. But the education system was not ready, its evolution was slow and its openness was merely superficial. The idea of intercultural education was still at the experimental stage; it needed to be allied with a global intercultural policy. Schools continued to be part of the problem rather than the vectors in which the question of the schooling of mobile families' children would be addressed.

At the end of the 20th century, two developments created a totally new situation: first, the movement of people from state to state intensified and took on new forms; second, minority groups began to appear in places where they had never been active before. The 1993 Vienna Summit was focused on the issue of minorities, and several fundamental texts were adopted. The Heads of State stressed, "The national minorities which the turbulence of history has established in Europe have to be protected and respected in order to contribute to stability and peace . . .". The decisions taken by the Vienna Summit were followed by the adoption of major texts such as the "Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities", which have become essential references for the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe.

The coming together of these two phenomena—increased mobility and the emergence of heretofore unknown minority groups—reshaped the social, cultural and political landscape. Pluriculturalism and multiculturalism had become a world reality. But pluriculturalism and multiculturalism are only static descriptions of a demographic reality. In effect, because of the fluid situation caused by the mobility of people, the givens are changing; the mosaic of peoples is constantly being transformed into an international kaleidoscope. The task of developing new policies that will address the situation in the 21st century necessitates moving from the juxtaposition of pluriculturalism to the dynamic coming together introduced by interculturalism.

States find themselves faced with the need to manage an ever-changing cultural diversity. In a reversal of perspectives, the cultural groups formerly considered outside the norm or marginal now become a source of inspiration. The activities begun for them become a source of innovation. In a delightful twist of fate, the programs for teaching Gypsy and Traveller children have now become valuable paradigms that are revealing, motivating and symbolic. The fact of this shift is assumed: for instance, the Steering Committee that is piloting the 2002–2009 Council of Europe project, "The Education of Roma Children in Europe", asserts:

The education of Roma, in the European context, must be recognised as the source of necessary renewal in the domain of Education. A renewal of teaching approaches can and should be one of the effects of the Project, at a time when education is running out of steam. (Council of Europe, 2006)

Thus the process of persuading schools to make Traveller children welcome has created a movement that introduces new pedagogical approaches, new perspectives in teacher training and the development of new teaching methods like open and distance learning. The response to the educational needs of the children of travelling peoples requires flexibility and openness to diversity. Travelling families serve as a reminder that school-based education is not an end in itself or a goal in its own right; it is a means of achieving personal balance, professional training, social adaptation and cultural development.

Recognising that travelling groups serve as particularly effective examples of distinct cultures is to validate their presence and to see their existence as a positive. They become a good example, in some ways a model example (Liégeois, 1998, 2007). Thus those who formerly were marginalised become central and play a vital role in enacting a mainstream policy.

The advances in this effort to achieve true interculturalism are often only experimental; their consolidation, like their dissemination into the education system, requires time and the clearance of many obstacles. Flexibility is needed so that the best innovations can emerge from among diverse initiatives. The creative attempts that have been made in the education of travelling people can play an invaluable role in this area. Policy-makers must move from ethnocentric categorisation to pedagogical pluralism; they must be open to the participation of concerned parents; they must take into account the total situation and participate in the establishment of a global intercultural policy, at the heart of which intercultural teaching will easily find its place.

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Preface

William Binchy

This is a difficult and challenging book. It interrogates not only the ingrained prejudices of settled society relating to nomads and nomadism but also the assumption that there are easy and uncontroversial solutions that will help to overcome this prejudice. Its focus is on the education system, where discrimination against migrant and nomadic populations is notorious. Ingrained assumptions about the importance of sedentarism underlie educational policy, so that mobility is regarded, in itself, as oppositional to the norms of education and the provision of educational services. The measurable failure of educational systems to accommodate nomadic culture is attributed to the deviancy of those on the move rather than the failure to acknowledge the deep legitimacy of non-sedentary life choices.

The book has broad horizons, with contributions from authors relating to a very wide range of people on the move in countries in four continents. What emerges are common patterns of discrimination and lack of understanding but also some new initiatives that give some cause for hope. There is, however, no false sense of inevitable progress. Moreover, there is a frank acknowledgment by contributors that a shared experience of discrimination does not mean that the several groups of mobile people have any developed sense of homogeneity.

This feature of the book is perhaps worth stressing since the range of peoples whom it studies is so broad as not to come within the comfortable categories under which international human rights issues are debated. Circus and fairground people tend to fall outside statutory definitions of ethnicity; migrant farm workers may not all be able to invoke the provisions of the Migrant Workers Convention. Indigenous Peoples are diversifying their cultural practices, and many no longer fit established understandings of these peoples. Groups in the Roma/Traveller spectrum are recognised internationally as ethnic, but their ethnic status is often contested at national levels. Yet in terms of the discriminations that they face, in relation to their right to education and a range of other rights, these groups have a great deal in common.

International human rights discourse is useful in framing specific questions that must trouble those of nomadic culture. How can the right to education be reconciled with practices of involving children in work at an

early age? How can traditional gender roles be modified to give true meaning to that right? At a deeper level, there is a need for debate about the very meaning of education, enlightened by a nomadic perspective.

Perhaps it would be useful for those engaged in the debate about the education of people on the move to invoke the concept of human dignity, which is at the heart of contemporary human rights philosophy and appears in the leading international human rights instruments. Human dignity recognises the inherent and equal value of every human being; it rises above social prejudice and acknowledges the legitimacy of pluralism in culture. It should be the banner under which those seeking the kinds of change advocated by the several authors in this book should assemble.

Acknowledgments

The editors express their appreciation to the many people without whom this book would not have been written. Particular thanks are extended to the following individuals:

- Ben Holtzman and Liz Levine, respectively Research Editor and Editorial Assistant at Routledge, for indispensable support and encouragement
- Ryan Kenney and his colleagues at IBT Global for their superb typesetting and copyediting
- The chapter authors for their exemplary scholarship and meeting our deadlines
- Professors William Binchy, Jean-Pierre Liégeois and Judith A. Gouwens for writing respectively the Preface, the Foreword and the Respondent's Text
- Ing. Emilio A. Anteliz for indefatigably tracking down potential contributors and assisting with proofreading
- Ms Ann Ryland for translating the Foreword
- The two anonymous reviewers of the book proposal
- The colleagues who refereed one or more anonymised versions of the submitted chapters:
 - Professor Marie-José Barbot, Université Charles de Gaulle, France
 - Dr Kalwant Bhopal, University of Southampton, United Kingdom
 - Mrs Phyllida Coombes, Independent Scholar, Australia (three chapters)
 - Dr Fred Dervin, University of Turku, Finland
 - Mr Wei Guo, University of Western Sydney, Australia
 - Mr Peter Hallinan, CQUniversity, Australia
 - Ms Patricia Cahape Hammer, ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, United States of America
 - Associate Professor Bobby Harreveld, CQUniversity, Australia
 - Dr Betty Jordan, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom
 - Associate Professor Gerardo R. López, Indiana University at Bloomington, United States of America

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- Dr Ray Melecio, ESCORT, United States of America
- Dr Carmen Mills, University of Queensland, Australia
- Dr Reamonn Ó Donnchadha, Independent Scholar, Ireland
- Dr Michael Shevlin, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland
- Professor Michael Singh, University of Western Sydney, Australia
- Our families for their unfailing love and interest
- And most importantly of all the Travellers, nomads and migrant workers whose lives are reported in this book; we hope that we have engaged with them respectfully and provided the foundation for ongoing dialogue.

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