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## ARTS-BASED APPROACHES TO STUDYING TRAVELLER CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

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**Abstract:** In this article, we present ideas on how arts-based methods can be applied to conducting research with a minority ethnic group (i.e., Traveller children) and offer ways to analyse data. We refer to the culture of Traveller children, report statistics on their educational performance and refer to recent research in Northern Ireland on their disengagement from compulsory post-primary (11-16 years old) education. We look through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and consider a re-think of the approach typically used in research to tap into Traveller children's educational experiences. We offer a brief summary of the principles of arts-based research, outlining

the theoretical underpinnings of supporters who argue for its use in educational research settings. We elaborate on three arts-based research methods as options in the design of conducting research with Traveller children and offer advice on associated ethical issues. In exploring methods of analysis, we refer to the types of data and suggest a content and thematic analytical approach to interpret the data. In conclusion, we reiterate the importance of offering these culturally responsive means to engage with this minority ethnic group.

**Keywords:** Traveller children; photographs as data; collage in the classroom; musical expression; content and thematic analyses

This article's topic is twofold: we propose how to use arts-based research to elicit views from a sector of society in Northern Ireland deemed part of a minority ethnic group (i.e., Traveller children); and how to analyse corresponding data. The article is of value to researchers (both student and academic) as it informs them about the design of an arts-based research study, which is based on a careful exploration of research-informed ways to implement arts-based methods. The context for this proposed research relates to a lack of engagement between researchers and the Traveller community using culturally responsive research methods, and a priority of inviting this minority ethnic group to debate on educational practice. The research methods proposed are arts-based and involve photography, collage, and music.

In this article, we introduce the reader to the lifestyle of the Traveller community, provide an insight into Traveller children's academic achievements in post-primary education, and give a snapshot of other recent research on this minority ethnic group. We offer Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, as well as Lundy's (2007) model for conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child when considering appropriate research methods to connect with Traveller children, and focus on theories that underpin arts-based research. Following an outline of employing photography, collage, and music as methods to elicit Traveller children's views on education, as well as consideration of relevant ethical issues, we argue for using content and thematic analyses and explain how to carry them out. We conclude by asserting that arts-based research methods are culturally responsive in facilitating Traveller children's voices, compared to traditional research methods. In our roles as researchers who work with undergraduate and postgraduate students of teacher education, we support the use of arts-based research methods and advocate for them to be considered by students when conducting their research projects.

***“In this article, we introduce the reader to the lifestyle of the Traveller community, provide an insight into Traveller children’s academic achievements in post-primary education, and give a snapshot of other recent research on this minority ethnic group.”***

The Department of Education Northern Ireland (2010) view the Irish Traveller community, of which Traveller children belong, as “a community of people . . . who are identified (by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, cultures and traditions, including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland” (p. 1). The Irish Traveller community is an indigenous minority ethnic group who follow a nomadic lifestyle as part of their cultural identity. Traveller children play a major role within this community by contributing to the continuation of its common ancestry. Traveller children share the same culture, values, and traditions as their parents, often immerse themselves in their own language, and view their community as distinctive from the settled community. Regarding its common ancestry, people cannot identify themselves as Travellers unless they are born into the community. This leads to marriage between Traveller families, and for Traveller children this can occur as early as 16 years of age. Maintaining their culture, values, and traditions is vital to this minority ethnic group. Connecting with other Traveller families, operating as self-employed and financially independent, organising events to commemorate funerals and celebrate weddings, rejecting settled ways of life (including formal education), and being cautious of people outside their own community, all contribute to the deep-rooted and ritual behaviours of this community which are passed down to the Traveller children (Pavee Point and Irish Human Rights Commission, 2008; The Traveller Movement, 2015).

We suggest the vulnerability of Traveller children, in terms of their high levels of illiteracy as reported by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2008), can be addressed using arts-based research methods. Leavy (2017) offered the following description of arts-based research: “methodological tools used by researchers across the disciplines during any or all phases of research, including problem generation, data or content generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation” (p. 4). Leavy explained that arts-based research, “may draw on any art form and representational forms that include but are not limited to . . . performative forms (music, songs, dance, creative movement, theatre); visual art (photography, drawing, painting, collage, installation art, three-dimensional (3-D) art, sculpture, comics, quilts, needlework); . . .” (p. 4).

The Northern Ireland Executive (2011) aspired to address the educational needs of Traveller children and to facilitate them as contributors to educational debate. This fits the ultimate goal of arts-based educational research noted by Barone and Eisner (2006) as being for “the betterment of educational policy and practice” (p. 96). Arts-based research can explore the personal experiences of Traveller children in educational settings in Northern Ireland using a selection of arts-based research methods to reveal issues that make them disengage from compulsory post-primary education.

Arts-based research methods can provide an opportunity for Traveller children to express their voice when exploring their personal educational experiences. In previous research that used imagery by post-primary pupils to elicit their views on school culture and pupil participation, Leitch and Mitchell (2007) commented that:

The visual images, created by students are used both as a visual means of data collection in themselves (representations) and stimuli to understand, in more depth, pupils' personal meanings, experience(s) and interpretations of their school's culture through follow-up research conversations. (p. 54)

### **Local Governmental Statistics and Recent Research in Northern Ireland on Traveller Children in Education**

The Northern Ireland Executive (2011) published a news release relating to the then Education Minister for Northern Ireland when talking about a taskforce on the education of Travellers set up three years earlier. It referred to Traveller children being disadvantaged in terms of education and facing severe inequality and suffering. The Education Minister called for Traveller children to be provided with equal opportunities at school within an inclusive learning environment. This required schools to take additional positive actions in areas such as access, inclusion, attainment, attendance, and relationships.

Regarding the educational performance of Traveller children, the Department of Education Northern Ireland no longer publishes details of their academic achievements in compulsory post-primary education. Instead, its statistical bulletins (the most recent being for the 2014/2015 school year) present an analysis of examination performance of children in Year 12 and Year 14 in post-primary education in Northern Ireland by focusing on variables, which include school type, gender, education and library boards, free school meal entitlement, and management type. Hamilton, Bloomer, Holohan, and Bell (2007) cited the last recorded statistics by the Department of Education Northern Ireland for Traveller children at Key Stage Three (11-14 years old) for the 2004/2005 school year. They indicated that for performance in English at Key Stage Three, only 19.4% of Traveller children achieved the expected level 5 or above (compared to 73.3% of all pupils). For performance in Mathematics at Key Stage Three, only 29% of Traveller children achieved the expected level 5 or above (compared to 71% of all pupils). At Key Stage Four (14-16 years old) in the 2003/2004 combined with 2004/2005 school years, Hamilton et al. (2007) cited statistics that indicated only 24% of Traveller children achieved 5+ GCSEs A\* - G (compared to 88-89% of all pupils).

Following that, the report of the Taskforce on Traveller Education (2011) to the Department of Education Northern Ireland cited statistics sourced from the school leavers' survey. This report indicated that in relation to attainment for the five school years in compulsory post-primary education, between 2003/2004 and 2008/2009, 61.9% of Traveller children left school achieving no GCSEs (compared to 2.9% of the Northern Ireland total school leavers for the 2008/2009 school year). In a statistical bulletin by the Department of Education Northern Ireland (2016) on the qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers 2014/15, Irish Travellers were included in the category of minority ethnic groups, along with other groups, and therefore no data specific to Traveller children in Northern Ireland are currently available.

A report by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2006) on developing a strategy for equality in education for Travellers, referred to its consultation carried out with Travellers on education. There was a perception by Travellers that school attendance did not necessarily culminate in satisfactory levels of educational performance or attainment, and that Traveller children experienced racist bullying. The report referred to non-attendance at school being due to a fear of bullying, disillusionment, and education not being relevant, leading to high numbers of illiterate Traveller children. There is also reference in the report of Traveller children feeling marginalised in schools, often experiencing racial prejudice and hostility.

The report on educational provision for Traveller children by Hamilton et al. (2007) was published by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. In this report, results suggested that some Traveller children supported the importance of learning to read and write, but that the relevance of compulsory education and qualifications were questioned. There was also a feeling among Traveller children that the school curriculum and system failed to meet their needs, therefore contributing to their low expectations regarding compulsory education.

The report of the Taskforce on Traveller Education (2011) to the Department of Education Northern Ireland referred to issues faced by Traveller children in post-primary education in Northern Ireland. These included, for example, lack of curricular relevance, low self-esteem, a need for focused learning to meet their needs, and a lack of recognition for Traveller traditions. These issues could be investigated further using arts-based research methods with Traveller children.

Typically, research studies carried out with Traveller children in Northern Ireland schools use methods that rely on a questionnaire. Although beneficial and generating important data, this article proposes a re-think of previous methods of inquiry to

incorporate an arts-based research design which is innovative, creative, attractive and limitless. We believe this type of thinking can reveal new perspectives from Traveller children relating to their education in post-primary schools. It can appeal more to the Traveller community in Northern Ireland as evidenced by Hamilton et al. (2007) who consulted with An Múna Tober (AMT), a Traveller support programme in Belfast, and commented that, “In view of their previous experiences, AMT believed that artwork, paintings, story telling, music and drama would be appropriate consultation tools . . . with the children and young people” (p. 47).

We suggest these types of arts-based methods proposed by AMT are more interactive, exciting, culturally responsive, and fun for Traveller children compared to questionnaires. We believe also that due to the high numbers of illiterate Traveller children in comparison to the general population, these arts-based methods lend themselves more to the educational needs of young Travellers, as they will not have to read a questionnaire and write responses to questions.

### **Connecting the Worldviews of Researchers and the Researched**

Clough and Nutbrown (2012) postulate that to consider social science research trustworthy, it must be purposive, persuasive, positional, and political. This article addresses the latter two tenets because the participants are from a minority ethnic group. Caution must be exercised in maintaining credibility of claims made, since data are inevitably collected within a political context and therefore analysed in accordance with researchers’ worldviews. To authenticate Traveller children’s perspectives, this study examines these latter two precepts through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. Before doing so, it is important to acknowledge this particular theoretical framework has, according to Tudge, Payir, Mercon-Vargas, Cao, Liang, Li, and O’ Brien (2016), often been misinterpreted in the past. In a bid to avoid replicating such misunderstandings, this article refers to updated critiques of Bronfenbrenner’s seminal model.

Over the lifespan of his work, Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 2005) sought to convey a bio-ecological understanding of human development. Latterly, he placed greater emphasis on innate characteristics and their potential impact on an individual’s life-long development. In refining his theory, Bronfenbrenner came up with the Person, Process, Context, and Time (PPCT) model. In terms of the first “P” in the PPCT model (Person), he believed children possess three types of characteristics that they present to the social world, in addition to their innate biological and genetic traits. These three types of characteristics included: firstly, demand characteristics (visibly identifiable markers, such as, age, gender, and race that can influence another’s reaction to and

expectation of someone); secondly, resource characteristics (internal cognitive, mental, and emotional dispositions that influence how one handles different life situations. They also include one's access to social and material opportunities, like shelter, food, and education, as well as strong attachments to significant others); and thirdly, force characteristics (motivations, sense of self-efficacy, and resilience).

When referring to the second "P" in the PPCT model (Process), Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 2005) pinpointed two types of interaction, i.e., with objects and people. He suggested that resultant cognitive, affective, and social outcomes depend largely on the nature and quality of these interactions. The third letter, "C," in the PPCT model (Context) tends to be the most frequently recalled element of the framework. Configured as a series of interlinked concentric circles, they include environments that exert, according to Houston (2017), "ever-increasing spheres of social influence, much like a grouping of nested Russian dolls" (p. 57). At the heart of these circles exists the microsystem where the child resides along with the people and objects they interact with closely on a daily basis. It is here that bonding occurs and self-identity is cultivated. Surrounding this is the mesosystem, made up of a series of connected mini-mesosystems that the child may participate in or use. These include milieu such as family and friendship circles, healthcare organisations, educational institutions and religious establishments. The richness of the various mesosystems provides stimulation and meaning for the child.

Beyond this lies the exosystem, which although the child may not come in direct contact with, it still impacts their immediate environment. An example of this includes concerns about a child's welfare, when social services have powers to intervene. Encapsulating the aforementioned layers of this system is the macrosystem. This refers to the larger socio-cultural context, where political and economic policies are made. Bronfenbrenner argued that although many societies possess similar organisational traits, e.g., schooling, there are significant differences in how various groups experience such institutions. Houston (2017) reminds us that it is within this layer of the overall system that the state exerts its power to distribute wealth and create equity. Although criticised by Houston (2017) for being "more expository, rather than explanatory" (p. 58), in his discussion of power differentials and their effect on a child's development, Bronfenbrenner claimed that it is at this level that a child's life chances and choices are determined. "T," the fourth letter in the PPCT model (Time), which Bronfenbrenner originally referred to as the chronosystem, relates to temporally, profound changes within and across the above-mentioned systems affecting the developing person.

This article suggests the worlds of the researcher and the researched are diametrically opposed in many ways, leading to cultural dissonance. This is because Traveller children and their families have their own distinctive cultural traditions,

language (Shelta), social customs, and family practices. This has implications for how they view and interact with government, healthcare, legal, social, and religious organisations. Since they reside on the periphery of Northern Irish society and are often stereotyped as non-compliant, there is a discernible power imbalance present, especially in terms of educational opportunity and outcomes.

In order to address some of these inherent societal inequalities, Henderson, DeCuir-Gunby, and Gill (2016) offer lessons learned from their work with economically disadvantaged minority ethnic youth. In attempting to promote resilience within this marginalised group, they advocate a movement towards a collectivist orientation, whereby relational ties across Bronfenbrenner's ecological model are emphasised, rather than being individual layers of the framework. Henderson et al. (2016) believe that the former approach re-orientates the perceived view of this group from "at risk" to "at promise" (p. 469) by illuminating the "promotive factors" (p. 470) to resilience. Moreover, by doing so, parts of the overall system can compensate for the short-term absence of resources as well as buffer inadequacies elsewhere in the system. Henderson et al. (2016) draw on a plethora of research to support the idea that engaging with and empowering minority ethnic families (microsystem) and communities (mesosystem) creates a ripple that positively affects a myriad of social, cognitive, cultural, and economic outcomes. Stipanovic and Woo (2017) present a similar argument in their examination of how to best facilitate racial and minority ethnic high school students to pursue STEM careers.

While there is hope in finding ways to truly involve the Traveller community in social science research, an approach, such as the one suggested in this article, must consider realistic challenges to that goal. Building meaningful relationships with Traveller families will be difficult due to the marginalised treatment they receive and the resultant mistrust it produces. Indeed, they are often regarded as not wanting to be included in mainstream society and are therefore believed to contribute to their own discrimination. Even when cognisant of such biases, Stipanovic and Woo (2017) remind us to be reflexive as researchers so that our approach to data collection and analyses does not become contaminated. Consequently, there is much to do in breaking down communication barriers and increasing buy in to working with researchers. Once engaged, the difficulty then is in retaining contact since, as implied by their name, Travellers are a transient population. Withstanding such difficulties, the arts-based methods approach to research presented in this article offers a first step in the process of reaching out and inviting Traveller children to be heard in educational circles. We further this endeavour by offering a way of facilitating the voices of Traveller children within our approach.

## Facilitating Traveller Children's Voices

It is important to facilitate the voices of Traveller children who become research participants. So often in research, adults speak on behalf of children (under the age of 18) who are considered minors, and who have, until recently, been viewed as less capable of expressing their opinions clearly and rationally (Davis, 2007). However, due to the expansion of and variation in research methods now available, the educational research canvas is changing. This issue is highlighted by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, created by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (1989), influencing data collection so that advocacy on the part of children is now always necessary. The idea that children should be recognised as knowledgeable participants with rights is now infused throughout education across the United Kingdom (UK) and particularly in Northern Ireland, where it is believed by the Department of Education Northern Ireland (2009, 2011) that children's direct involvement in schools' decision-making processes can lead to more effective and inclusive schooling.

However in the case of Traveller children, they are, for the most part, outside of the compulsory education system and so there is even less chance of their voices being heard. For this reason, it is necessary to consider what Lundy (2007) proposes as "a new model for conceptualising Article 12 which attempts to capture more fully the true extent of the UK's legal obligations to children in terms of educational decision making" (p. 931). If children are to be allowed to express their views in all matters affecting them, then according to Lundy (2007) any research methods chosen must encompass certain elements. Specifically, these are space to express their views, voice to facilitate the expression of their views, audience to receive their views, and influence so their views may be acted upon, as and where appropriate. In regards to this article, the focus is firmly on the aspect of voice being facilitated within a safe space. Traveller children's voices can be facilitated through an arts-based methods approach to research, which allows for culturally grounded data to be gathered.

### Theoretical Underpinnings of Arts-Based Research

Arts-based research is supported by Barone and Eisner (2012) who suggest it is unique from other research as it considers aesthetics in the inquiry and representation of data, which they deem important. McNiff (2008) views arts-based research as a systematic use of artistic process to investigate and hopefully understand experiences held by both researcher and participant. He argues for researchers to fashion their own manner of investigation, to observe without limitations, and to suspend judgement. Eisner (2008), one of the founders of the Arts-Based Research Institute at Stanford

University, believed the arts could be employed more productively within education to understand issues within school environments in a more emotional and imaginative manner. Barone (2008) argues that researchers who employ arts-based research methods can inform better the minds of the general public on social, political, and educational issues. He views art as emancipatory as it may reveal perspectives that would otherwise remain hidden if researchers used a more popular method of research, for example, a questionnaire. Barone (2008) writes, “when an arts-based work engenders an aesthetic experience in its readers or viewers, empathy may be established, connections made, perceptions altered, emotions touched, equilibria disturbed, the status quo rendered questionable” (p. 39).

Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, and Grauer (2006) refer to the design of an arts-based research project as one that starts with researchers conceiving an approach with few limitations, and inquiring of participants about issues relevant to a topic that develops during the process by utilising different arts-based methods. They suggest that the data generated should be open to interpretation by researchers in a creative manner, which is portrayed in a visual, performative, or text-based format that contributes to a new understanding of the topic. This coincides with McNiff (2008) who writes about the technique and process associated with arts-based research, suggesting that arts-based researchers should be prepared to begin with questions, but should be willing also to design arts-based methods in response to particular situations as they arise.

Different kinds of arts-based research employs different techniques to gathering data. Barone and Eisner (2006) identify three kinds, which include, “genres of narrative construction and storytelling, educational connoisseurship and criticism, and nonliterary forms of arts-based inquiry” (p. 98). Narrative construction and storytelling can be a poem, novel, short story, life story, or even an autobiography. Educational connoisseurship and criticism take the form of writing, where participants demonstrate their appreciation, understanding or perceptions of art works and disclose the significance, meaning or quality behind the art works that illuminate understanding. Nonliterary forms of arts-based research can be painting, photography, collage, music, sculpture, or even dance. For the purpose of this article, the focus of the suggested arts-based research methods falls within this nonliterary form of gathering data, since Traveller children in Northern Ireland underperform in English at Key Stage Three, compared to all children in Northern Ireland, as referred to previously by Hamilton et al. (2007).

## Arts-Based Methods to Elicit Traveller Children's Views on Education

### Photography

The first proposed arts-based method in the design of research with Traveller children is photography. It is supported by research from Schratz and Steiner-Loffler (1998) who used photography to gather data from pupils on an evaluation of their school and who commented, "Photography gives pupils the chance to research into their 'inner world' of school life without a lot of verbal argumentation" (p. 235). In her research on children using cameras as a means of expression, Luttrell (2010) chose photography as it stimulates conversation between researchers and young people and, "because it is an especially useful metaphor for thinking about how we read our social worlds, construct our selves in relation to others, and express matters of the heart" (p. 225). Buchanan (2001), who writes about photography's role in research, sees it as a valuable data source representing an individual's lived experience with a snapshot of a social reality pertinent to an individual's lifestyle or environment. However, he suggests caution when analysing photographs, as they can be selective in portraying truth as the individual taking the photograph is not simply a passive observer of life.

Arts-based researchers use photography in two ways. The first, known as photo elicitation, involves the use of photographs, paintings, videos, cartoons, graffiti, or other images to stimulate discussion among participants about a topic. Burke (2008) views photo elicitation as "the coupling of words and images, allowing for an interaction between the two" (p. 28). Either the researcher or the participants can provide the stimuli. The resultant discussion becomes the data to be analysed. When the researcher chooses images to explore, a researcher-based locus of control ensues, leading to inherent biases creeping into the study due to the choice of images provided for discussion. In other words, the researcher's perceptions of what is important to Traveller children, in terms of educational experiences, are likely to influence the images selected. This affects the subsequent discussion and conclusions drawn.

The second approach, called photo voice, entails the research participants taking photographs, which become the data themselves. Leavy (2015) suggests that photo voice is a research method where "research participants are given cameras and asked to photograph their environment and circumstances" (p. 234). This approach honours the central objective of this article when cast in the light of Lundy's (2007) proposed model. That is to say, the elements of space, voice, and audience are facilitated by participants taking photographs that they feel represent their educational experiences, followed by engagement in discussion that reveals meaning associated with their

environment, circumstances, and aspirations. In addition, facilitating Traveller children's voices involves the vital dimension of social action. Employing this culturally responsive approach to explore Traveller children's experiences of compulsory education increases the likelihood of achieving the element of influence as outlined in Lundy's (2007) proposed model. By increasing the authenticity of the data gathered, it has the potential to recognise the legitimacy of the Traveller community and to move forward policies that give due weight to Traveller children's views. The power of this approach lies in facilitating consultation with Traveller children, whose views can often contradict the impressions held by policy and decision-makers.

Kaplan (2008), who used participatory photography (photo voice) to elicit the views of marginalised students in schools, offers advice based on his experience. This advice relates to the potential of causing tensions between pupils and teachers, when asking pupils to take a series of photographs within the school environment for an arts-based research project. He suggests dialogue between researchers and school staff over an extended period to ensure a trusting relationship is developed and maintained. This can curb the level of apprehension felt by staff in schools when facilitating pupils to take photographs of the school environment, possibly resulting in limitations as to what can be photographed and used for the purpose of research.

By enabling Traveller children to take photographs, working with them over an extended period, training them on using equipment, empowering them to think creatively and intuitively when representing their lived experiences in this way, and setting certain rules of what should not be photographed for discussion, can all contribute to a healthy relationship between researchers and Traveller children. This indicates that ownership of gathering data is collaborative, which can help lead to trust from people who are generally considered marginalised.

Our proposed arts-based method of photography is to offer each Traveller child a basic digital camera, accompanied with training on how to use the device. Traveller children would also be informed of the purpose of this particular approach to research. To be effective, Traveller children need to take photographs inside and outside their school environment that reflect both what they currently learn and what they would like to learn about at school. This coincides with Emmison and Smith (2000) who refer to five ways of using photographs for research, one of which is to discover the views of a particular cultural group. Grugel (2008), in her research using photo elicitation with children, argued that photographs stimulate a child's memory to reveal reasons for previously taking specific photographs. She suggests the use of photographs taken by children themselves to elicit an unstructured discussion with researchers is much better than researchers setting pre-determined questions.

## Collage

The second proposed arts-based research method for our research with Traveller children is collage. This technique creates a form of art using materials, such as images from newspapers and magazines or other types of objects, which are cut, shaped and glued to a sheet of cardstock. Colour, words, designs, or paint can be applied to the collage and it can be two or three-dimensional.

Collage provides an opportunity for research participants to be in control and decide how free they can be with their thoughts. These can be represented in a visual manner, which is not possible when using a questionnaire. In research with young people using scrapbooks as a method of gathering data, within which they created collages, Bragg and Buckingham (2008) emphasised the importance of participant control by realising that, "The research therefore needed to allow young people to find their own level of response and to have some control over what information they were prepared to share" (p. 115). They found strength in collage because it enabled research participants to think about a topic in their own time and outside of school (having had an explanation by researchers about what to do). Traveller children can work in their own time and space and think carefully about what they have created in their collage prior to discussion with the researchers.

Collage does not require artistic talent or expensive art materials, as suggested by Davis (2008) who believes that, "a simple collage of magazine photos may at the same time evoke inexpressible feeling states that 'seep' through the fissures and layers, tugging at what lies below, behind or beyond the choice and arrangement of pictures" (p. 246). Due to the nature of collage involving basic skills learned early in life, such as cutting out pictures from newspapers and sticking them onto cardstock, this activity may suit Traveller children. One reason for this is that they have become disengaged from compulsory education, as evidenced by statistics from the Department of Education Northern Ireland, but seem to have an interest in being creative and expressive, as supported by AMT. This is especially so of teenage Traveller girls who put much effort and take great pride in designing dresses associated with traditional Traveller cultural celebrations, including First Communion and weddings.

We suggest that Traveller children participating in the proposed research receive training on ways in which to make collages, accompanied with arts and crafts materials, magazines, newspapers, and other relevant items. Traveller children would also be informed of the purpose of this aspect of the research process. To be relevant, Traveller children need to create collages that reflect how they view their current relationship with other children at school, and how they would like their relationship to be with other children at school. Butler-Kisber (2010) views collage as a way for researchers to help

participants, “find the words to express a subjective experience, to initiate a dialogue with participants, or as guided reflection” (p. 114).

## **Music**

The third proposed arts-based research method for research with Traveller children is music. This form of artistic expression is attractive to Traveller children, as traditional Irish music forms part of their culture. This is evidenced by Greenwood (2012) who employed theatre-making in a project with Roma (a minority ethnic group connected with Travellers) children, and believed that drama, as an arts-based research method, would fit perfectly with their culture and enjoyment of music, song, and dance. It enabled them to express themselves musically, through song, reflecting their lived experiences. Boyle (2008) used music, through song, to express how educators and researchers redefine their practice. The resultant song referred to his rejection of traditional academic practices and enabled him to send out a message of hope and freedom. McCarthy (2013) viewed music as a potential way of facilitating young people to express their thoughts and ideas as a reflection of their lived experiences. However, Daykin (2004) would suggest that although music is a powerful way of expressing one’s internal thoughts, it is somewhat problematic to analyse and apply meaning to those thoughts for the purpose of research and creating new knowledge.

We suggest Traveller children choose an existing song, or create a song. To be purposeful, Traveller children need the song to reflect their current relationship with teachers, and how they would like their relationship to be with teachers. Traveller children could identify existing songs to be sourced by researchers to play in their company, or alternatively create their own song to sing in the presence of researchers who record it. Research by Carless and Douglas (2011), involving song as a tool of inquiry, reported their belief that song offers something unique and of value which differs from words alone stemming from a questionnaire.

## **Ethical Issues for Arts-Based Research with Traveller Children**

The three proposed arts-based research methods of photography, collage, and music present ethical issues that need consideration to become appropriate ways of studying Traveller children’s educational experiences. We would recommend that arts-based researchers refer to their institutional code of practice for research when planning their project and complete a relevant research ethics application for submission to a Research Ethics Committee (REC) or Institutional Review Board (IRB). They should consult an appropriate professional association’s ethical guidelines as recommended by the REC or IRB. Arts-based researchers have to address potential ethical issues during

the design of their research with Traveller children, as they are a vulnerable group and are untrusting of the settled community. These ethical issues become more pertinent when expecting Traveller children to use three types of arts-based research methods. These can be time-consuming and potentially contentious due to taking photographs. In addition, Traveller children are under 18 years of age, and therefore parental consent is required.

Essentially, arts-based researchers should create an ethical protocol for school leaders involved in the arts-based research study, similar to that prescribed by Mitchell (2011) when referring to taking photographs for the purpose of research. This protocol would include a valid and transparent explanation on the purpose and importance of the arts-based research, details on the methods, and any potential risks. It would also be necessary to provide information in the protocol about the arts-based researchers, where they work and who is funding the research, if it is indeed funded. Consideration must be given towards how research data (i.e., photographs, collages, and music) are to be used and how research findings are to be disseminated (i.e., publications, conferences, and teaching). The ethical protocol needs to include details on how confidentiality and anonymity are preserved, how data are stored in a secure manner, the length of time for which data are stored, and who gains access to data. On the issues of confidentiality and anonymity, Wiles (2013) refers to processes that researchers should follow and suggests that, “confidentiality is taken to mean that identifiable information about individuals collected during the process of research will not be disclosed and that the identity of research participants will be protected through various processes designed to anonymise them...” (p. 42). It is important to outline how much time Traveller children have to commit to taking part and how this is managed, as well as how informed consent is obtained from parents and children. It is advisable to communicate all this information orally through face-to-face meetings with the Traveller parents and children, and to be patient when building up as best a rapport as possible with the Traveller community.

## **Types of Data Collected**

The data collected from this proposed arts-based research project will consist of the photographs, collages, and songs, as outlined earlier in this article, which are accompanied by transcripts of discussions. Traveller children will take photographs relating to their educational experiences. These photographs will be transferred onto a laptop computer and, those belonging to each Traveller child, will be viewed on a screen by researchers in the company of each Traveller child. An unstructured discussion, containing no pre-determined questions, ensues between each Traveller child and

researchers, this conversation will be recorded using a digital audio recording device. The photographs and audio recording for each Traveller child will become data.

After each Traveller child produces a collage relevant to their educational experiences, it will be presented to researchers on an individual basis, and each Traveller child will be given the opportunity, in an unstructured discussion, to provide further explanations relating to the meaning behind the visual representations. These discussions are recorded using a digital audio recording device and the recordings and collages form the data.

The recordings or performances stemming from each Traveller child, who chooses an existing song relevant to their educational experiences that researchers listen to or devises a song relevant to their educational experiences that is performed in the presence of researchers, will also become data. An unstructured discussion follows between researchers and Traveller child, which is recorded and becomes part of the data.

Using unstructured discussions to elicit data from the Traveller children, rather than using structured or even semi-structured ones, is supported by Grugel (2008) who believed it better to allow children to make up their own minds about what to say regarding a photograph, instead of responding to structured interview questions. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), employing a structured approach to the discussion implies arts-based researchers have an awareness of what they do not know, and therefore can create questions to help reveal what they do not know. However, the unstructured approach implies the opposite, in that arts-based researchers have no awareness of what they do not know and rely heavily on participants in a discussion to be free to say what they want about a photograph, a collage or a song.

We are more interested in gaining information from the Traveller children that is focused on the unique and personalised accounts of their educational experiences. We do not wish to employ standardised questions; rather we veer towards open-ended and unstructured discussions. Even a semi-structured discussion would not suit our needs in the case of this proposed study, as topics to inform questions become pre-determined, even though they may be open-ended, and prompts (for clarification) or probes (for elaboration) are used in a semi-structured discussion. In order to create a balance in authority between the arts-based researcher and the Traveller children and to attempt to address power dynamics, it is important that the participants produce the photographs, the collages and the songs and are free to decide what they want to say via an unstructured discussion.

An example of planning for an unstructured discussion is one suggested by Fontana and Frey (1998) where the arts-based researcher needs to contemplate gaining access, being familiar with culture and language, presenting oneself, finding an insider, establishing trust, and building rapport. Considering the example of conducting research with a minority ethnic group, the arts-based researcher has to figure out the best way to get access to the participants, such as volunteering with a support group in a school associated with participants. Becoming knowledgeable of culture and language by learning phrases or words and reading books, is paramount for the arts-based researcher, and can be done by listening to conversations among the Traveller community and sourcing material from a library about their history. Introducing oneself to participants requires much thought in terms of career status, dress, social standing or position of authority, and it is best to make the maximum effort to fit in. By connecting with an insider from a minority ethnic group, the arts-based researcher can have access to a cultural guide, e.g., a representative who speaks on behalf of a group. To ensure a successful unstructured discussion with a minority ethnic group, one must establish the trust of participants that must be maintained, otherwise it becomes weak and destructive, therefore an arts-based researcher should spend time with participants leading up to the unstructured discussions. As becoming aware of what is not known is the ultimate aim of the unstructured discussion, the arts-based researcher should strive to build up a rapport with members of a minority ethnic group to ensure research becomes more informed, by viewing the world from their frame of reference instead of encroaching academic notions upon them.

## Data Analysis

Designing an arts-based research study in terms of analysing data can be challenging. However, with reference to this proposed study, we suggest using content analysis and thematic analysis to represent data obtained from Traveller children. This suggestion is based on the idea that content analysis follows a system that is verifiable as it uses coding and categorisation. It follows stages which are, according to Mayring (2004), clear and unambiguous, and can reduce large quantities of data into manageable and, more importantly, meaningful accounts of lived experiences, which can be appreciated by those outside of academia. It can reveal the frequency, trends and importance of particular areas of interest, thus exposing, in this particular case, Traveller children's educational experiences. Reasons for suggesting thematic analysis are based on the richness it provides and the meaning it captures through the interpretation of data collected from participants. It also utilises a strategy that involves categorisation, although it has a broader capacity compared to content analysis. Ayres (2008) views the strategy associated with thematic analysis as one "by which data are segmented, categorized, summarized, and reconstructed in a way that captures the

important concepts within a data set” (p. 867). This strategy incorporated within thematic analysis is beneficial as it preserves a connection between identified themes and the original data.

Content analysis involves researchers analysing the content of photographs, collages, songs, and accompanying transcripts to determine and rank collectively the most to the least commonly occurring objects and terminology associated with the learning experienced by Traveller children and their relationships with other children and teachers at school. The data analysis can lead to charts and tables accompanied by written summaries explaining them. This particular representation of data can follow five stages outlined by Norton (2009) who has used this way of analysing data as, “it combines both the search for rich meanings and a deeper understanding of the topic I am researching, together with the ability to carry out some very basic quantitative procedures” (p. 123).

According to Norton (2009), the first stage of content analysis involves researchers making a decision on which unit of analysis to use. The unit of analysis can be information units that take the form of a single word, short phrase or sentence. These describe the contents contained within photographs and collages, highlight important lines of chosen or performed songs, and reveal relevant aspects of the unstructured discussions associated with the visual and audio data. Stage two divides the various types of data into chosen information units. This can be straightforward for photographs and collages, as typically, information units take the descriptive form of a single word, for instance “teacher” or “computer,” which identifies relevant people or objects contained within the visual media. For songs and transcripts of discussions, researchers can break them down into various information units, such as “scared,” “lonely,” or “bullied.” Stages three and four involve researchers constructing a series of categories to fit the various information units. Researchers construct these categories as they read each of the information units. Then the researchers synthesise the data and assign each information unit to categories that become over-arching representations of the data, like “people in authority” or “negative experiences,” bearing in mind that all information units are assigned and that an information unit is assigned to only one category. If the number of categories becomes too large, researchers revisit them to determine if some can be merged to form new, more manageable categories.

The fifth stage of content analysis, according to Norton (2009), provides researchers with a definitive calculation of the percentage breakdown of the information units that fit within each of the constructed categories. This enables researchers to produce data to respond to a research question related to, for example, the most commonly occurring objects and terminology highlighted by Traveller children regarding their learning and relationships with teachers and other children. In addition, it produces

data that are relevant and easily understood by policy-makers, teachers, parents, children, and groups that represent Travellers. Leitch (2008) in her account of studies that employed visual imagery in their methodologies commented on one of them by stating, "In this study, in order to create a generalized children's narrative that would have impact at policy level, content analysis of the visual and written data permitted collective priorities to be mapped and carry weight" (p. 41).

However, it should be noted that, according to Rose (2007), assigning information units to coded categories when conducting content analysis of visual imagery is never perfect, as one researcher can view an image differently from another and therefore it can be interpreted differently. Rose (2007) emphasises sticking to the rules associated with content analysis so that it is explicit in terms of methods, "Being so up-front about your research procedures is a sort of reflexive research strategy" (p. 61).

Following an initial content analysis, researchers can adopt another approach, described by Norton (2009) as thematic analysis of data, to respond to a research question on Traveller children's learning experiences and relationships with teachers and other children at school.

This type of analysis applies to the visual data, obtained through artistic expression, which leads to the audio-recorded transcripts of unstructured discussions had by researchers and Traveller children. The first stage involves researchers immersing themselves in the first transcript to take note of any general themes that arise, such as "a feeling of not valuing education." The second stage requires researchers to read each transcript, in turn, to generate a range of labelled categories that are descriptive, like "don't understand" or "homework boring." For the next stage, researchers delete those labelled categories that contain only one or two examples from an entire set of transcripts. Stage four, according to Norton (2009), requires researchers to examine a final set of categories and to merge them to form a set of more manageable and relabelled themes, checking their relationship to the general themes emerging from stage one.

The fifth stage requires researchers to check the themes against a second reading of the entire transcripts and to choose quotes from Traveller children that accurately reflect the theme labels. Stage six is when researchers link together those themes that share a relationship, with the advice from Norton (2009) being, "Keep in mind your research aim and look for patterns that make sense, in order to tell a coherent and convincing account of what the data tells you" (p. 121). The final stage of this prescribed thematic analysis involves researchers presenting their findings. They select what they consider the most important theme, with accompanying examples of data from transcripts, and write a summary on this theme, using quotes for illustration.

Then researchers move onto the next important theme and follow the same procedure, until all themes are identified and summarised.

## Conclusion

If social science researchers are to progress beyond using questionnaires to document the marginalised feelings of Northern Ireland's Traveller children when it comes to their experiences of compulsory education, then it is incumbent upon them to offer this sector of society some culturally responsive means of engagement. Therefore, this article concludes that if implemented and analysed appropriately, the three arts-based research methods of photography, collage, and music can make a more valuable contribution to facilitating the voices of Traveller children in relation to their lived educational experiences compared to traditional methods, such as a questionnaire. In turn, this presents a stronger case for these culturally contextualised views to be heard by policy and decision-makers. In other words, if researchers are mindful of Traveller children's illiteracy and specific cultural traditions when creating a research project, this awareness can lead to the design of research methods that have the capacity to facilitate natural lines of communication for those being researched. The welcome by-product of this approach can be powerful in that it sends out the message that Traveller children's ways of life are respectfully honoured, as opposed to altered to fit in with more traditional research methods.

Employing Lundy's (2007) proposed model for conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to underpin the choice of research methods, strengthens this approach since it offers researchers concrete ways to operationalise the belief that the views of a particular sector of society are valuable and valued. Setting this within the larger ecological systems theory, as advocated by Bronfenbrenner (1979), encourages greater potential for the fusion rather than the collision of both researchers' and participants' worlds. It is only then that it becomes possible to begin serving the educational needs of Traveller children more visibly and precisely, rather than allowing this particular group to continue to be subsumed into the generic category of minority ethnic groups by the Department of Education Northern Ireland (2016), when it comes to presenting statistics and providing subsequent educational provision. This is even more imperative if one holds the view that Traveller children are indigenous, yet unique, compared to the profiles of more recent migrants to this part of the UK. Spending time and thinking creatively about research methods is essential if, as researchers, we are serious about connecting meaningfully to marginalised groups who often view compulsory education and its outworks with suspicion and relative despondency when it comes to making a difference to their lives.

Despite the potential inherent within an arts-based approach to research such as the one proposed in this article, both Traveller children and staff in post-primary schools might at first view such research with apprehension. This is understandable since it involves methods rarely used in educational research in general and even less so with Traveller children in Northern Ireland in particular. From the point of view of staff and school management, there may be questions of value and validity with such an approach since the methods discussed might be considered soft in terms of the data they generate. This is reasonable, as schools are very busy places and so must prioritise ventures that are likely to produce concrete, usable data to progress learning and teaching. After all, they are held to high account publicly and so they must choose where to place their efforts and energy.

It might also be feasible to suggest that since Traveller communities are transient, some schools may see little value in conducting such research if there are reduced opportunities to address potential recommendations. In terms of a research grant, funding bodies may see a potentially greater return for their financial assistance if they support research relating to other immigrant populations within Northern Ireland which are larger and much less transient. Having said all of this, if researchers build up and maintain close relations with both Traveller children as well as teaching staff, and assure them of the value contained within these innovative approaches to gathering data, then it can turn out to reveal a very powerful account of the young Travellers' lived experiences at school.

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