
Not Just Content, but Style: Gypsy^[1] children traversing boundaries

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ABSTRACT The policy to integrate English Gypsy children in schools tends to overlook the difficulties facing such youngsters in their attempts to negotiate between contrasting practices and values at home and school. Contradictions between such practices/value systems at home and school entail not only knowledge/skills, but also differing modes of instruction/transmission. Informed by learning theories and New Literacy discourse, along with evidence from previous accounts of Romani learning practices in the home context, this article draws on findings from an ethnographic study of English Gypsies (1996-2000), and data from a follow-up study, involving original and additional participants (2005-6). The article explores attitudes across age-groups, outlining, in particular, the knowledge/skill base valued in the home setting, highlighting the mismatch between home and school expectations, and the difference of expectation in child-adult relations in each context. It argues that policy-makers need to consider the wider impact of school education on identity and group membership.

Introduction

While often presented as a means of empowering the disempowered, the commitment to integrate children from minority and marginal groups into mainstream education tends to overlook the wider social and cultural outcomes. The assumption that the acquisition of a standard literacy will equip such youngsters with the skills that will provide greater opportunities, along with social and economic flexibility, tends to dismiss other skills and knowledge acquired in home settings. Furthermore, it both reifies and privileges schooled notions of literacy. Not only should literacy be considered in its wider social, cultural, historical, economic and political contexts (Gee, 2000; Street, 2001), but its impact needs to be viewed in the dual light of the interaction between school literacies and alternative literacies acquired in home settings, and also of subsequent community membership. This imperative becomes of still greater significance in view of the uncertain boundaries between accommodation, acculturation and assimilation (Levinson, 2007).

With regard to different communities, the potential contradictions and discontinuities between learning paradigms at home and school had already been identified as a significant issue over two decades ago (see e.g. Heath, 1983; Resnick, 1987). Berg (1970) suggested that education systems tend to foster arbitrary relationships between academic success and life success. Tizard and Hughes (1984) revealed ways in which children were forced to compartmentalize the milieus of home and school. The contrasts and discontinuities reported by Resnick (1987) between school and other learning entailed deconstruction into four themes, all of which would appear to be applicable to the traditional Gypsy situation: (a) individual cognition in school vs. shared cognition outside; (b) pure mentation in school vs. tool manipulation outside; (c) symbol manipulation in school vs. contextualized reasoning outside; (d) generalised learning in school vs. situation-specific competencies outside.

If it can be established that divergent learning paradigms at home and school produce a conflict both in terms of content and modes of transmission of skills/knowledge, it becomes easier

to account for some of the difficulties encountered by Gypsy children in the education system, which have been identified in official reports (see e.g. Ofsted, 1996, 1999, 2003). At the same time, it should be noted that the issues go beyond such content and style, and concern hierarchies of power. Within their concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, 1998), *peripherality* and *legitimacy* were proposed as types of modification required to make actual participation possible. *Peripherality* was perceived as providing an approximation of full participation that gives exposure to actual practice. Without *legitimacy*, the process was deemed to be incomplete, and that entails full acceptance as fellow members from the community. While it will inevitably vary across institutions, it would seem rare to encounter cases in which Gypsy youngsters have been granted such acceptance. This lack of acceptance extends beyond suspicion of the individual or the group; as noted by Brooker (2002), tensions between teachers and families are liable to develop quite rapidly when the latter are perceived to enter school without certain knowledge of institutional norms or expectations. Even the accepted system of play-based learning in early childhood may disadvantage Gypsy children in this regard (see Levinson, 2005).

Recent literature in the field of Gypsy education tends to take a position that places a higher value on knowledge/skills gained at home (Kiddle, 1999; Derrington & Kendall, 2004; Danaher et al, 2007). At the same time, the underlying assumption is that increased engagement with the school system is desirable, even though many parents remain apprehensive that formal knowledge acquired at school is not only at odds with, but liable to undermine, the skills (and value system connected to those skills) that are acquired at home. Influenced quite often by their own negative experiences of schooling, such parents often have their apprehensions confirmed by a lack of communication from their children's teachers

This article seeks to explore the nature of Gypsy learning, considering the type of skills that are likely to be transmitted in the home environment. These skills include personal qualities essential in relationships, and demonstrate the ways in which education and socialisation are interconnected. In this, the actual modes of learning, the ways in which knowledge is transmitted, are as significant as the knowledge/skill base. In terms of Gypsy children bridging these milieus, it is important to bear in mind issues beyond those that seem important to educators – such as the relative status of Gypsy and non-Gypsy knowledge, as well as the potential social and psychological impact on children of the difficulties arising from differences between the two systems.

Models of Learning for Gypsy Children at Home and School

The interconnection between life and learning at home in a specifically Romani context has been commented on previously (see e.g. Adams et al, 1975; Okely, 1983; Smith, 1997); its radically different dimension to models of learning in a school context has been illustrated (Lee & Warren, 1991); and a potentially negative interaction between school and home learning has been proposed (Liegeois, 1987, 1997). As with any learning system, there is a cost – in effect, all that is omitted from its syllabus. What might be suggested, perhaps, is a 'deprivation' in terms of choice, but even in this case, there is a need to engage with issues from a cultural as well as an educational trajectory, an approach rarely encountered in official reports.

Piasere (1987) summarised many of the key differences between the Romani learning paradigm and that of the surrounding society. A Romani upbringing entails a mode of education 'based upon particular educational relationships which a priori preclude the existence of abstract instruction removed from a real life context' (Piasere, 1987, p. 47). In his study of different Gypsy groups, Piasere identified some of the elements intrinsic to the Gypsy model of learning:

Gypsy pedagogic technique differs from the non-Gypsy in one principal aspect, but one which for us is the quintessence of education. For them it occurs within the context of real life activity by participation, rather than by verbal instruction out of context, in preparation for future participation. Pedagogic content is also dissimilar: since the problems with which the Gypsy deals in daily life are predominantly connected with personal interaction, abstract generalisations are unknown and useless, replaced instead by concrete and specific symbolism which reflects shared and reciprocal experience. Knowledge is gained not by asking questions but by living out responses. (Piasere, in Liegeois, 1987, p. 48)

Such a learning paradigm is contrasted with that encountered in schools. The dichotomy has been illustrated by Lee & Warren (1991) in their exploration of an 'instrumental/non instrumental' dimension, the former being intrinsic to the Romani approach. Aspects of formal schooling are embraced only if they are 'useful to the Romani; useful for individual and group survival'. Hence literacy and numeracy skills, and to a lesser degree a facility with computers, are perceived as desirable. Other learning has no obvious connection to the home environment. Indeed, it may in subtle ways, relating to content, approach and underlying ethos, be oppositional to learning at home. Above all, Gypsy families tend to view with suspicion and resist 'the cultural and ideological overlay, the hidden curricula of schooling and education' (Lee & Warren, 1991, pp. 318-319).

The traditional situation within Romani communities is for the family and the extended kinship network to constitute the primary influences in a child's life (Smith, 1997). Through participation in the social and economic life of the community, self-confidence, respect for others, and a strong sense of identity are acquired (Liegeois, 1987). By working alongside parents and other family members, children gain expertise in the skills deemed essential by their community. Commenting on children's direct involvement in the process of production, both on- and off-site, something rarely experienced by non-Gypsy children, Okely (1983) has pointed out it would be likely to be condemned by outsiders as 'exploitation', and taking a contrary, somewhat iconoclastic position, Okely (1997) has argued for a re-evaluation of such a viewpoint. Liegeois (1987) suggested that the work of young children in Gypsy communities should be viewed neither as 'exploitation' nor even as 'employment', but rather, as 'collaboration'.

Methodology

A brief summary is outlined here. A fuller description is provided elsewhere (see e.g. Levinson, 2007). This article draws upon data generated from two fieldwork studies. The first was a three-and-a-half-year ethnographic study (1996-2000) of the interface between Gypsy culture and the educational system. This was followed (2005-6) by a series of interviews from a subset of the original cohort and a verification of the specific issues outlined below with a new cohort.

Research questions from the reflexive data analysis were typical of those in ethnographic studies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The initial focus, at the outset of data collection for this study, investigated reasons for the difficulties encountered by Gypsy children in schools.

In the early phases of the first research process, a total period of 101 days was spent in seven schools in the South West of England (five primary schools [7-11-year-olds] and two secondary schools [11-16-year-olds]), during which time 47 Gypsy youngsters were interviewed and observed in classroom and playground settings.

During lesson observations, specific aspects relating to the social and educational experiences of Gypsy children were monitored on different occasions – for example, interactions with teachers; interactions with both Gypsy and non-Gypsy children; engagement with educational tasks. Playground observation was conducted at individual and group level, and from a variety of vantage points. Whenever possible, the children who had been observed were subsequently engaged in formal interviews or informal discussions so that their perspectives on events could be considered.

Of the 47 Gypsy children in schools, 31 were engaged in individual, formal and structured interviews that focused on their attitudes and values regarding schooling, aspirations and concerns, narrative skills, and the use of leisure time. Informal discussions were also conducted with these and the other Gypsy children.

During the school-based phase of the study it became evident that the focus needed to be extended to incorporate the home/school interface and that this would necessitate visits to Gypsy sites. Twenty Gypsy sites were visited in the United Kingdom, with the majority visited being in the South West of England. Twelve of these sites were visited on more than one occasion. Where access could not be facilitated by fieldworkers, sites were visited unannounced, and an attempt was made to negotiate access. When making unannounced visits, in recognition of attitudes regarding Gypsy females interacting with non-Gypsy males, the initial strategy was to arrive at the site when the men were likely to be home, usually in the late afternoon or at weekends.

Nevertheless, the terms of access were rarely fixed, and the process of gaining access and collecting data remained a challenge throughout the study. This seemed sometimes to be due to a

desire on the part of those involved to claim greater control of the researcher–researched relationship; on other occasions, it was simply an outcome of investigating an itinerant group.

Where access was granted to a Gypsy site, it allowed for informal conversations, and interviews, as well as gathering observational data. Various aspects of children's lives were observed, including patterns of interaction between adults and children and use of time. Such areas were selected as they had emerged as being of potential salience during the early phases of research. For example, one issue arising during the school-based research had been the way in which Gypsy children tended to move between classrooms during lessons without permission, which was frequently interpreted by the schools involved as a challenge to institutional rules and to teacher authority (Levinson & Sparkes, 2005).

Details of both the observations and the informal discussions were recorded in a field diary. Fifty adults (27 males and 23 females) also agreed to take part in formal interviews where their anonymity was guaranteed. These interviews took place in a number of contexts, usually inside trailers, but in some instances outside trailers, and on occasion in houses, cars or pubs.

During interviews an informal style was adopted, and the format of the interview was flexible, ranging from thematic or semi-structured to unstructured in nature, with the adult Gypsies involved. In certain instances, participants spoke most freely when *they* selected the topics for discussion and framed them within a life-history context.

Between 2005 and 2006 a follow-up study took place, during which some key informants (12 people) were contacted again, to allow for an update to findings during the initial study. In addition, this validation also included interviews with 18 new participants, across the age ranges.

During both study phases, there was a conscious attempt to avoid recounting a single narrative, and to allow for incongruities, discontinuities and contradictions. However, it is inevitable that the attempt to produce a coherent account leads to a tendency to exclude meanings and interpretations extraneous to that story. Data from interviews and observation taken from both study phases (1996-2000; 2005-6) are presented here. All the names used here are pseudonyms, except in cases where participants specifically requested otherwise.

In the context of this article, several salient themes emerged from the two studies, the most significant of which concerned: (a) the nature of learning in different environments – (home and school); (b) the contrasting modes by which knowledge and skills are transmitted; (c) the different uses and meanings of skills acquired at home and school; and (d) the shifting status of different types of knowledge within Gypsy communities.

It should be noted that Gypsies live in a number of different contexts, and it is therefore potentially misleading to generalise. However, it remains true that certain types of knowledge, constituting an identifiable skills-base, have persisted across communities. These extend beyond the actual knowledge itself, and relate to the sense of a specific Gypsy identity.

Skills/Knowledge Acquired at Home

Traditional lifestyles among Gypsy groups (Hawes & Perez, 1995; Levinson & Sparkes, 2004) have been threatened by internal and external factors in recent years, and among many Gypsy children, the features described below are no longer salient in their lives. Indeed, among some Gypsy children who have moved into houses, and whose families have taken on a sedentary existence, there are signs that their lifestyles are increasingly similar to those of other, local, non-Gypsy children. At the same time, the resolution among many families to retain a distinctive way of life has ensured that certain features have remained.

Lee & Warren (1991) have emphasised the 'alternative' nature of Gypsy learning, skills such as knowing both the economy and people of specific localities; manual dexterity; mechanical ingenuity; highly developed memory; salesmanship and bargaining skills. The nature of learning at home has been summarised by a number of observers along gender lines. Apart from developing domestic skills – cooking, house-keeping and child-care, girls from Gypsy families are likely to acquire at a young age from their mothers, grandmothers, sisters and aunts a wider sense of responsibility as providers and carers (O'Boyle, 1990), as well as specific skills, such as an appreciation of general selling strategies or fortune-telling techniques (Okely, 1983; Smith, 1997). Traditionally, a girl might have developed a range of skills, ranging from making wax flowers to an

aptitude for fighting. Similarly, observers have noted that a traditional Romani upbringing encouraged boys to acquire mechanical ability, knowledge of metals, arithmetical aptitude, and negotiating skills (Adams et al, 1975; Smith, 1997). By the age of 12, they might have mastered essential driving skills (Okely, 1983). They might have learned to sort through scrap, separating valuable from base materials, ferrous from non-ferrous metals.

While emphasis, to varying degrees, of all the above attributes has been encountered during the course of this research, it might be added that they only provide a partial picture. Sometimes understated by participants was the implicit, secondary learning acquired by children while working alongside parents. For example, girls might develop less tangible skills, such as the following: the abilities to charm; to read situations quickly; to act in a collaborative and coordinated manner; to draw quick and astute psychological inferences; to predict and pre-empt situations; to curb male aggression. There are a number of skills, less obvious than those listed above, which a boy might have acquired, and again, these are wide-ranging. They might include the abilities to adapt rapidly to changing situations, to look after themselves in fights, to read both people and situations quickly, to drive a hard bargain, and to bluff. The evidence of this research indicates, also, that both boys and girls might gain an enhanced awareness of the countryside, develop skills with animals, and as a result of owning possessions from a very early age, over which they have the freedom to bargain and 'chop' (negotiate swaps), an acute understanding of money. Among both boys and girls, even as skills are being acquired, they are put into use, tested and honed.

The complexity of learning at home, as well as its holistic nature, is illustrated by the following example:

Ellie (age 20s): We always used to go with my mother when she went calling, and I would always take mine. They're such lovely children, and it always makes things more ... well, like seeing a friend than business. And it's good for the children because they're learning all the time, even the little one, taking it all in.

Me: What sort of things are they learning?

Ellie: How to talk to people, you know. How to work out things out from their house, and things ... their clothes ... the way they look at you. Oh yeh, and how to deal with it when people start swearing at you ... There's one thing, see, I learnt off my own mother: never lose your temper. Very respected woman, my mother, a real lady. ... And other things she learned me, lots, like if you shows respect, you gets it back. And everyone you call on is different. Like sometimes you say a thing because you know you won't be calling on them again, and sometimes you're not at all pushy. Well, maybe about a small thing, because you know next time you might be trying to sell something bigger. See, it all takes planning out, even before you go out, where to go, what to put on. And you've got to remember everything: where to go; the way there; what different people like ...

The skills which children are accumulating here are diverse. They include social and cognitive skills, and both interpersonal ability and heightened psychological awareness are required. In particular, necessary skills entail the ability to assess and react instantly to moods, to know when to persevere, when to withdraw; to make predictions about people from limited information; to discover the needs of others; to adapt roles; to memorise data concerning routes and preferences; to use both verbal and non-verbal techniques to gain trust.

However, there is no uniformity of pattern. The background of a constantly transforming environment results in a need for repeated adaptations. The urbanisation of many Gypsy groups (Sibley, 1981; Fraser, 1995) has led to changing needs, and skills necessary in a rural context (e.g. smithing, horse-dealing, agricultural labouring) have gradually been superseded over the passing decades by others (e.g. laying tarmac, scrapping, dealing in car parts). In this context, the capacity to meet ever-changing needs is, in itself, a prized asset. Many participants have emphasised that what they try to impart to their children, above all, is the ability to deal with change, which itself has often been referred to in connection with hardship. Furthermore, far from being restricted to childhood years, the learning process is part of the whole life-cycle:

I can turn me 'and to anything: tree surgery, tarmacking. I can earn £250 on a tree job. I could go to anyone in Glastonbury, get them to do it for 15 or 20 quid. That's all you need to pay 'em.

Practically nothing. They'll do it for nothing. I can't make them out. PVC. Stick up drains and all that. 'ow to buy and sell scrap. When I lived in that 'ouse in Glastonbury there was no one to go around with. That's why I pop up at sites, learning 'ow to do this and that. (Duke, 20s)

At the same time, there is evidence of a feeling that 'traditional' skills are being lost. This results from a changing socio-economic background, and has been manifested in this research by expressions from younger, as well as older, participants. Terry, age 11, for example, complained that life had changed as soon as his family moved from a site to a council house. He never went out with the older men any more, he was 'stuck' in school most of the time, where he was learning 'fuck all', and life had become 'boring'. Katie, age eight, said that she got up each day at five o'clock to help with jobs, cleaning up the home, looking after the animals, preparing breakfast, etc. – and although she liked school, she claimed to enjoy housework more, adding that she was learning all the time from her mother. Among other children, too, the positive feelings about jobs at home reflected ways in which the learning process was embedded in relationships.

Transmission of Knowledge and Skills

The distinction between teaching styles encountered by Romani children in home and school contexts has been highlighted by several commentators. Drawing attention to the 'conservative', 'technologically driven', and 'management oriented' culture that had become increasingly dominant in mainstream education, Lee & Warren (1991) contrasted Gypsy 'instrumentalism' to that which (in Heidegger's [1977] view) characterised the prevalent mode of education in schools. In the view of Lee and Warren (1991), Gypsies were perceived not to reject training in skills such as reading and writing, calculation, and mechanical operations, but to reject the inevitability of future roles related to that training. On the contrary, training is accepted only to the extent that it reinforces Romani life. Lee & Warren also suggest that Gypsies differentiate between *schooling* and *education*, rejecting the latter as they equate it with socialisation into an external society.

Traditional Gypsy upbringings entail learning through participation in everyday life (Piasere, 1987). Learning is integrated in real-life experience (Smith, 1997). As suggested above, children are often producing, performing some useful role, either economic or social, at the same time as they are learning. This is divergent from the pattern at school, where learning is likely to be an end in itself, or where 'payment' is deferred, the acquisition of knowledge and skills being perceived as a foundation for some future activity.

Learning, particularly in the early stages of childhood, relies on observation. Such is its significance that there is a feeling among adults that if deprived of this experience as a child, an adult could never become skilled (Okely, 1983). Adults and older children conduct tasks with smaller children around them. One participant in my research told me that her brother's daughter was 'a bit slow', and the reason for this was that her brother had taken up with, then married, a non-Gypsy woman 'who don't know our ways, and can't teach the little ones nothing'. That's why each time I had visited, she remarked, the girl had been in *her* trailer, 'so that she can be learned proper, like I learned it from my mum'.

On a number of sites I observed very young children (ages four to six) watching fathers dismantling scrap. Subsequently, they seemed to experiment and learn through imitation, dismantling toys with hammers or other tools that come to hand. Sometimes identified by outsiders as *destructive* play (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1985; Taylor, 1988), it could equally be interpreted as *constructive* learning. It is in this light, perhaps, that it is necessary to consider the dismantling of a play-bus I witnessed, when the driver watched, impotently, as children unscrewed panels from the interior (see Levinson, 2005).

Distinctive orientations to surrounding environments are also evident. Considering perceptions of tips, for example, it has been observed that a Traveller will see 'not a rubbish heap, but copper, glass and aluminium' (O'Boyle, 1990, p. 136). O'Boyle quoted one Irish Traveller who emphasised this very point, suggesting that if a settled person's child and a Traveller child were each let loose on a dump, the former would run for comics, while the latter would seek out copper or brass. It might be argued that a necessity for economic opportunism has been imposed on the Traveller child as a consequence of the daily struggle for survival.

Confirming the observations of other commentators (e.g. Berthier, 1979; Smith, 1997), a number of participants in this research have also stressed the importance of children learning to work on their own initiative. When asked how this is achieved, they have tended to speak about the involvement of children from an early age in the tasks in which adults are engaged, beginning with observation. From a relatively early stage, however, this can be more than passive:

I was just messing about with this engine and told Billy [J.R.'s son, age 7] to change the plugs.
They didn't need changing or anything; I just wanted to see if he could do it. (J.R., 20s)

In such a way skills are transmitted across generations, but the acquisition of other skills is not precluded. Indeed, many adults in this research have cited this as the reason for a growing willingness to send children to school. Nevertheless, numerous participants have suggested that they feel that children learn more at home, and a few have offered as a factor in this the respective modes of learning. 'Children on the site can go round and learn at their own speed' and 'They're free to pick things up on their own' were the comments of two mothers. Such remarks are revealing in their implication of: (a) a lack of pressure on the learner; (b) a substantial degree of autonomy granted to the learner. This entails further both the (spatial) freedom to get up and move around during learning, and the (temporal) freedom to decide when to stop, start and take breaks in learning.

Overall, it would seem that, among many families at least, learning at home is a more natural, organic process, occurring through absorption/inculcation, as distinct from some teaching/learning process encountered in school. In this process, learning occurs in an informal manner, at times, even, through stealth:

All the children have watched when I'm telling fortunes. Even when they were babies they were picking up things without knowing. (Estelle, 40s)

While observing parents and other older family members engaged in specific tasks, children are often being inculcated with secondary skills. This might involve the internalisation of verbal and non-verbal communication signals, or the social and moral codes which are preferred within their community. The freedom to imitate and develop through role-play that which has been observed leads to expertise in such areas. Reger & Gleeson (1991), for example, have demonstrated the sophisticated oral skills acquired at an early age by Hungarian Gypsy children.

Learning in the home environment is hardly ever abstract, theoretical and/or book-based. On the contrary, it entails active involvement in tasks, during which children exercise spatial and temporal autonomy. Learning is neither formally monitored nor tested. Although children are expected to help adults from an early age, differences between individuals are tolerated. There is no referencing according to group norms. There are no fixed expectations that children will attain a certain level of competence by a specific stage. One participant, for instance, told me that his youngest son (age 10) was 'better than his two older brothers [ages 13 and 14] put together' when it came to helping him with jobs, and this was because he 'seems to get the hang of things straight away'. However, the other two would catch up, he suggested, as 'cars can only move at the fastest speed they were made to go'. A number of adults expressed the conviction that cooperation was better than competition, the inference being a criticism of the school ethos. At home a child is rarely expected to learn in isolation. Parents and/or siblings are likely to be working alongside him/her. Liegeois (1987, p. 46) has argued that, far from being 'laissez-faire', the process is part of a 'coherent education towards independence'. Although I have suggested that progress is not monitored, 'experience, exploration, initiative and responsibility are rewarded' (Liegeois, 1986, p. 46). Learning occurs through observation and participation, and in contrast to the classroom, children have the freedom to initiate and create learning experiences (Smith, 1997). One mother complained to me that her six-year-old son never stopped asking questions when she was doing something, to the extent that it was difficult to get jobs completed. Her tone, however, was one of pride.

The encouragement given to children at home is seen as a contrast to the strategies used at school. Motivational strategies used by teachers are seen as perverse, and quite a few adult participants asked what the point was in constantly criticising children if you wanted to get the best out of them. Reflecting on knowledge and skills they themselves acquired at school, there was, among many adult subjects, the sense of wasted opportunities. Some attributed blame to

themselves, suggesting that, in retrospect, they wished that they had made more effort at school, but at least as many expressed disenchantment with the system.

Education and Socialisation

I try to encourage the boys in whatever they want. I tried to get them to learn to repair their own vehicles ... use their hands. Be able to get a job. The things I knew. I want them to learn from their father to be tolerant. (George, 40s)

As stated above, in the Gypsy model of learning, education and socialisation appear to be interconnected. The underlying purpose of Gypsy educational processes is to train the individual for a place in her/his society – ‘The principal lessons s/he learns are loyalty to family, sharing of resources, and initiative in acquiring the necessities of life ... In this way a cohesive society of security, mutual support and survival is maintained’ (O’Boyle, 1990, p. 34). A distinct value-system is embedded in education at home. Autonomy, responsibility and a sense of community are the aspirations of the Gypsy upbringing (Liegeois, 1987). Such an education is oriented towards group rather than individual needs. As a consequence, individualistic and egocentric activity is discouraged (Gmelch, 1977; O’Boyle, 1990). At the same time, independence is encouraged from an early age (Smith, 1997). Berthier (1979) has outlined some of the ways in which this can be reinforced – for example, by preparing food, dressing, or putting oneself to bed. This sense of autonomy, it has been suggested, is enhanced by lack of intervention from the adult world.

Learning to be tough, to look after oneself in physical confrontations, would appear to be a traditional and important part of the learning process. Several observers (Adams et al, 1975; Gmelch, 1977; Carter, 1996) have noted how parents praise children for fighting skills and conceal concern when their children are hurt. The findings of this research tend to support such findings, a typical assertion being that ‘they [children] have got to learn to look after themselves’, while fighting skills also seem to enhance status. The ability is linked to wider group survival. ‘We keep going because we’re scrappers’; ‘You never see a Gypsy giving up’; ‘If you hurt a Traveller, ’e never lets on. He’ll just bide ’is time till ’e can get you back’; ‘What the Roms learnt over all the years is to keep moving on, always be ready to learn new things, and be tough as old boots’ – these are some of the comments made during the course of this research. Once again, it underlines the way in which learning at home entails group/cultural as well as personal and economic survival skills.

Non-Gypsy skills/knowledge appeared to become more prestigious when they were seen to be of use to the wider community. It seems significant that, when talking about using skills acquired in a non-Gypsy milieu, a number of youngsters seemed to envisage the utilisation of the learning involved primarily within their own society:

I’d like to be a hairdresser; I get practice at home ... I could do my mum’s hair, my sisters’ – all the family. (Crystal, age 10)

[I’d like to be] An animal doctor ... erm ... a vet, that would be good. I could look after the animals at home. (Crystal-Louise, age 8)

A very few children suggested that they might be interested in training in professions such as nursing or teaching. Commonly, such aspirations were connected with ways in which their own communities might be supported. Jamie (age 11) told me that he had decided it would be a good idea to be a lawyer because it was his ambition to call round on his grandparents one day to tell them that their application for planning permission on their land had finally been granted, due to his own intervention. Repeatedly, it seemed that the only status worth gaining was within the family/communal group.

One group of parents told me that they were opposed to the acquisition of writing and computer skills, as this encouraged children to seek solitary forms of employment away from their families. Overall, future social alliances within the group would appear to be at least of equal significance within Gypsy education. In the majority of cases, people spoke about going off to do jobs with other family members or friends. Education of children would seem to be geared to the ability to work with others and forge short-term, as well as long-term, relationships. Valuable social skills include general attributes such as affability, as well as particular skills, such as the ability to negotiate. One complaint that was repeated on several occasions was the way in which, from the

earliest stage of schooling, children were given work to complete on a solitary basis. 'How exactly is that going to help them to get on in life when they are older?' asked one mother. Sue-Ellen (age 10) had been in trouble frequently for leaving her classroom to visit relatives or friends in other classes to check how they were getting on. Such behaviour is often perceived by schools as a deliberate challenge to institutional authority (Levinson & Sparkes, 2005), yet it was often a consequence of instructions from home to look after siblings or other younger group members. It also reflected customary practices in home settings.

Orientations towards Age

We've been speculating about Melissa for some time. She's 9 going on 19. She and this 14 year old have been an item (couple) for some time. She's already part of an adult world. (Theresa, head teacher of primary school)

I want to get married, go on the dole, go out the Berkeleys [local disco] with all me friends. That's what I want. That would be fun. (Sarah-Kay, age 10)

In interpreting such behaviour, it is also necessary to consider very different assumptions relating to age-groups, as in home settings, the same boundaries do not apply, and the rigid organisation of children according to age-group appears illogical. Emphasising the contrast between Gypsy and mainstream social frameworks and attitudes towards age-group, Carol (in her 30s) argued that Gypsy values were more rational: 'You don't have roads just for people of my age to drive on, or shops to go in, do you.'

In this regard, it might be helpful to recall some of the structural features of Gypsy/Traveller society.

In her study of Irish Travellers, O'Boyle (1990, p. 24) provided the following statistics: 50% of the Traveller population were estimated as being under 15 years of age; 'very few' Travellers reached the age of 65; the median age was 14 years (compared to 27 among the settled population). Against such a background, the impulse towards the early acquisition of adult roles becomes more understandable. Moreover, such a tendency is augmented by certain social attitudes: O'Boyle observed, for instance, that parents encourage daughters to marry early in order to keep them out of 'trouble' in an increasingly permissive environment.

'Insider' perspectives (Cannon & The Travellers of Thistlebrook, 1989; Smith, 1997) tend to confirm accounts of non-Gypsy observers that imply a perception of childhood in which roles diverge markedly from those prevalent in mainstream society. It is an alternative model in which children appear to display greater social and economic equality, and in which, to the outsider, childhood itself might appear to be relatively truncated.

Nevertheless, many parents were particularly protective of younger children, finding reasons to justify delays for sending children to school:

I'll probably put the children through school. But I wouldn't feel safe with them at play-group. Besides, you learn more stuff at home. Look at me: I can sell 'tatoes for a living; I can sell and do fortunes. Them other people can't do that. We do trees, tarmac, PVC. That's real learning, what you can use. I've been to some posh houses, fetched me kids up to help with jobs and all that. You don't see *their* kids helping. Even down the pub our kids will listen to chat. Pick up things. (Julie, age 19)

Indeed, the children do pick up things, and are often integrated in adult life. Working with adults is part of a 'coherent education towards independence', during which 'experience, exploration, initiative and responsibility are rewarded' (Liegeois, 1987, p. 46). 'There is no separation between the world of the child and the world of the adult' (Carter, 1996, p. 36). Organic to their cultural environment, the meaning and uses of that knowledge are instantly transparent to children acquiring the skills concerned. As they are contributing to the family well-being, youngsters are quickly treated on equal terms. Finally, there are no fixed borders between knowledge acquisition and knowledge use. Several youngsters of school age have boasted to me about their weekly earnings.

From an early age, Gypsy boys can be observed acting like men to gain status (Levinson & Sparkes, 2003). I met one youngster, Jack, whose family I knew quite well, driving a van along a

country lane on his way to meeting his uncle to carry out a job. At the time, Jack was 13, though he looked a little older. Nevertheless, he showed me a driving licence with his name on it, along with a false age.

In the circumstances, it does not seem all that surprising that learning at school seemed decontextualised, disempowering, and demeaning. Numerous children complained that they were treated like 'babies'. Quite often, they were also dismissive of non-Gypsy children, and rejected adult/child relationships at school. Roseanne (age 9) asked me why *she* should respect the teachers when they did not respect *her*. In common with other children of her age, and despite the fact that she described her parents as 'strict', she was already given a fair degree of autonomy in certain areas at home, and was expected to share responsibilities.

A number of teachers were perplexed by the behaviour of Gypsy children. A common position was that, while there was a readiness to accept certain cultural differences, there was also expectation of conformity to school norms. Otherwise, how could there be different rules for mainstream children? How could classroom order be maintained? Such issues emerged at a very early stage:

Some of the children don't know how to interact with adults in a way we would call appropriate.

Take Buz – totally uncontrolled. Only four and a half; just joined us. I knew there'd be problems and sent him to meet the Ed. Psych. [educational psychologist]. He walked in there. 'Right,' he said. 'Right,' the Ed. Psych said back, totally surprised. This was Grandad greeting the other men. That's all that Buz was doing. (Theresa, head-teacher of primary school)

Two teachers described Ruby (age 7) as 'unruly', 'unable to concentrate', and 'ungovernable'. Observation confirmed that Ruby found difficulty when engaged passively, listening, but as soon as she was asked to work, the only obvious issue was that she finished tasks rather quickly, and then engaged them in chat. 'She acts as if I'm one of her friends,' complained one teacher. Sol (age 6) was similarly described as a 'problem'. The issue was that he was chatting to teachers out of turn, had slapped one teacher on the back, convivially, and tried to perform 'high-fives' with other members of staff.

The Meanings and Relative Status of Learning in Different Contexts

Been a travelling boy all me life. Working with my father, hawking, grinding ... (Willie, 60s)

This is what my own mother did, and this is what my daughter will do. (Amy, 16)

Numerous participants, both adults and children, have referred to work and family relationships simultaneously. There seemed to be a strong perception across age groups of being links in a chain, and this gave certain skills and learning an emotional charge. 'Fact is this isn't actually the best way to do this,' one man told me about an electrical job he was doing, 'but it's the way the old man [his father] used to do wiring.'

Conversely, the connotations of learning at school are framed by relationships which have often been negative from the outset. Queenie (40s) told me how she used to take as literal her mother's threat, 'school-man will take you, chavvy [child], to the extent that she was 'frozed with fear' when she actually did have to go to school. Significantly, the nature of knowledge taught at home tends to offer immediate benefits – skills that can be used immediately, and status – whereas any advantage from school-based learning often seemed to be deferred, less practical, and limited to specific uses. Reading and writing can be useful in skills in dealing with the non-Gypsy world, but potentially wider meanings of literacy skills are rarely acknowledged. Where a degree of mutual consent occurs is in a perception of the importance of literacy, deemed necessary by Gypsy families for filling in official forms, acquiring driving licences, and so on (Liegeois, 1987; Smith, 1997), but it is extremely rare to find families where reading for pleasure occurs; on the contrary, it is often viewed with extreme suspicion, relating to issues of identity and group boundary maintenance (Levinson, 2007).

Nevertheless, the need for literacy was the most common reason given by both adults and children for attendance at school. Katie (age 8) was one among many children who said that the only important learning at school was 'reading and writing'. In general, school learning can be an asset, but it is not a preparation for life:

They're learning more at home. Why waste time at school? They're going to have to fend for themselves one day. (Alfie, 30s)

I like school, but I learnt more things at 'ome. School didn't learn me practically nothing. (Barry, 10)

It seems interesting that, at the age of 10, Barry is already speaking of school in the past tense. The way in which school education can be useful is construed almost exclusively in terms of making a living.

When asked what they had gained from attendance at school, a large proportion of adults seemed at a loss. Sport, woodwork, cooking, and so on were the type of areas about which positive comments were made. Many other parents had few expectations that their children would gain much more from schooling. At the same time, most expressed a willingness to support their children, whether they wished to attend or stay away.

From primary to secondary stage, youngsters themselves have frequently made allusions to the practical difficulties of doing schoolwork at home. Aspects to which reference has been made include lack of space, privacy, desks, pens and reference materials. Of still greater significance, perhaps, is the absence of emotional support at home:

They give us books and stuff to bring home, but there's the animals to look after when I get back. Anyway, Dad would probably shout: 'What you up to, girl, with all that rubbish. Come 'n give me a hand over here.' (Crystal-Louise, 8)

Although such experiences should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of parental opposition to education, a number of parents have expressed the view that school-work should be completed in school time. Very little evidence was found of encouragement from adults to complete homework. Val (age 11) said that her mother had told her she did not have to go on to secondary school if she preferred not to, while Ray (age seven) stated, in a rather factual manner: 'I stay off school whenever I don't want to go. My mum and dad say I don't ever have to go if I don't like it.' A number of girls have reported that their parents have discouraged them from remaining at school beyond primary age. For some, their own preferences have been overruled by parents who are apparently concerned about the nature of the institutions to which their daughters might be exposed. Some parents have stated that learning to look after a home and preparation for married life constitute more appropriate choices. A few went on to suggest that too much schooling would make their daughters unsuitable for marriage, a finding echoing that of Kiddle (1999).

It is the socialisation resulting from schooling that is viewed with greater apprehension than the education. Though the knowledge and skills acquired there might be perceived to have dubious benefit, it is the undermining of home values and a distinctive way of being that is viewed as the greater threat. One father complained that all his son had acquired from schooling were the abilities 'to answer back' and 'to be a softie', and 'long words – learning to speak like a *puff*'. He was also concerned that, at school, his teachers were all women. Real learning, he asserted, was about 'making things; mending things; using your hands', skills in Gypsy communities that are traditionally passed down along a male line.

The attitudes of parents inevitably lead to feelings of confusion in youngsters who are attempting to negotiate different, and often contradictory, settings. At our first meeting, Albie (age nine) informed me that he disliked school. A few months later he told me that he really enjoyed school. It transpired that nothing had occurred to alter his feelings. Albie said that he told his father that he hated going to school, as he knew his father was opposed to his going there; he told his mother that he liked school, as he knew that she wanted him to continue and 'get more brains' than his father. Similarly, he said that he behaved in different ways and said different things about school to teachers, Gypsy classmates, and non-Gypsy classmates. When I asked him to tell me what it was that he really felt about school, he told me that he no longer knew.

In some families, the status of school-based learning is reduced by the suspicion that Gypsy children are not really wanted at school. Many Gypsy children are subjected to name-calling and bullying, and while some react, and become aggressors, they remain victims. This only confirms negative feelings among adults, many of whom recall schools as being willing accomplices in their own frequent absences:

Teacher used to say to me: 'Ralph, you coming in tomorrow, then?' and I used to say: 'I don't think I am, Mr T, no. I'll probably be helping me dad and Uncle Ted.' 'Good idea, Ralph,' teacher would say, 'you'll probably only get up to no good if you do comes up 'ere.' (Ralph, in his 60s)

I learned to buy and sell 'orses and cars from my uncle. I'd skive school 3 or 4 times a week. Pea-picking, apple-picking, currant-picking. They let us 'ave time off from school. They weren't bothered. (Duke, 20s)

For many Gypsy parents, the predominant memories are of social isolation and, despite years of education in some cases, negligible learning outcomes:

I found school 'ard. All the moving around. People know you're a Traveller or Gypsy and call you names. School was a nightmare for me. I went all the time, from the age of five, wherever we was to. I never really learnt to read or write properly. At school we had to keep this diary, and every day I used to copy out what I had written the day before, very slowly. I wrote out that day over and over, the same old thing. They didn't realise what problems I was having ... When I got to my next school in Taunton, I can remember I was about 12, and I still couldn't tell one letter from the next. I'd have gone a lot further if I'd been able to. I was better than I seemed. I never really seemed to have a chance. (George, 40s)

The status of school-based learning is also downgraded by the perception of an, at best, tenuous connection with the *real world*. Children themselves have often demonstrated a lack of awareness as to ways in which education might be utilised, or unrealistic expectations. Sylvester (13) told me that he wanted to get a job, 'any job', but once he had finished in year 9, he was leaving school to go to university first to study science or medicine. Wayne (11), on the other hand, told me that as soon as he became 'really good at readin' and writin', and get all the qualifications, like A levels and degrees', he was going off to get a job. When I enquired what sort of job, his reply was: 'I don't know. Cleaning? My mum cleans.' Along with many other children, there seems little sense of the potential pathways from education.

In any event, decontextualised learning processes have often been rejected long before children reach such a point. This is well illustrated by the case of nine-year-old Joe, and what was presented to me by his teacher as his 'mathematical backwardness'. The teacher told me that he could not understand Joe's inability to compute quite simple sums, as he had been led to believe that, whatever their difficulties with literacy, Travellers were almost invariably numerate, 'as that's what they learn all the time in their culture'. It was true that Joe had not got a single correct answer on his worksheet on additions and subtractions, but when I chatted to him, informally, mentioning a trip to a shop at which I thought I might have been under-changed, and posing, in the process, a far more difficult mathematical question than those on the worksheet, I instantly received the correct answer. When I pointed this out to Joe, he became quite agitated: 'That's real. I mean it really happened. That man in the shop screwed you. And this ... this ... (waving his worksheet in disgust) is just paper. Who cares?'

Conclusion

It is evident that, traditionally, Gypsy children have gained expertise in a wide-ranging set of skills in the home setting. These skills connect closely to envisaged future roles. In a sense, learning at home is somewhat more like *work experience* than *schooling*, and such an education begins at a very early stage. However, the aims go beyond the acquisition of a knowledge/skills base; they embrace a pedagogical philosophy that connects to social and communal identities. It is envisaged that children will acquire not only a set of skills to assist them in future life, but an enhanced sense of autonomy and of group membership. Thus, the meaning of that which is learned at home goes beyond the actual knowledge itself, and is integral to a Gypsy sense of identity, according to which, life skills and occupation are part of a concept of being more than doing.

At home, there is no referencing according to group norms. There are no fixed expectations that children will attain a certain level of competence by a specific stage. At times, indeed, equality between siblings seems more important than achievement (Mac Anguosa, 1995). Inevitably, the attempt to engage with the education system as a group poses dilemmas within a framework

designed for individuals, both on institutional and personal levels (Levinson, 2007). It alters the processes by which Gypsy youngsters become included in new communities of practice.

While the two systems of learning are not necessarily mutually exclusive, it is evident that they do not complement one another in a way which allows for a smooth transition between the learning contexts. The dichotomy between formal and informal learning systems results in difficult choices, which embrace not only aspirations, but wider identities. Clearly, some Gypsy youngsters are evolving mechanisms to deal with the lack of congruence between the learning systems at home and school. In adapting to the school culture, this would seem to entail a degree of compartmentalisation. Increasingly, there are signs that younger children are amending their learning patterns to fit into the school environment. They would seem to be more amenable than parents or older siblings to the classroom regime. Judging by comments made by adults, such an acculturation process is viewed by parents with a mixture of consternation and pride. While such children seem to be negotiating their participation in school learning communities, it remains to be seen how they will negotiate their way back into their home learning communities, managing their participation in both contexts. The experiences of older Gypsies suggests that this has rarely been a comfortable process, and those concerned have tended to select one milieu or the other.

The concepts of *peripherality* and *legitimacy* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) would appear to be located around institutional factors relating to school; in the case of Gypsy children, it is important to consider such ideas in the light of home-based, as well as school-centred learning. Moreover, the acquisition of *legitimacy* in one setting (school) can serve to destabilise and undermine legitimacy in another context (home).

It is all too convenient to locate Gypsy children within a deficit model. Within the concepts of *classification* and *framing*, as conceived by Bernstein (1990, 1996), they would appear to struggle from the outset to grasp the differences between categories of learning and of child-adult interaction at home and school. The highly structured, hierarchical, rule-governed culture of school is both alien and repressive. Moreover, coming from homes in which they are unlikely to have been exposed to the written code, they are at a further disadvantage. Within another framework (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), the cultural capital they bring with them to the classroom is unlikely to be validated in that new environment. From such an entry point, once again, it is evident that they are likely to be confronted by awkward choices.

On the other hand, if we consider the situation from the standpoint of literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton et al, 2000) or community and personal literacies (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000), or if we select a preference for the notion of cultural resources (Gregory et al, 2004), close analysis of the home/school interface places the experiences of Gypsy children in a radically different perspective to that suggested in some educational reports. While it could still be argued that Gypsy children remain 'among the most educationally deprived' (DES, 1967), it becomes evident that they are also 'privileged', as a consequence of their exposure to a system of learning embedded in cultural survival, imbued with its own structures and implicit ethos, and designed to equip those involved with skills likely to be of both material and spiritual value in future life. Indeed, the mainstream curriculum could only benefit from such a holistic underlying philosophy.

Notes

- [1] I have used the term 'Gypsy' in this article in preference to 'Traveller', the term used, in general, by those working in the field. Both terms have their own connotations. Liegeois (1986) rejected 'Traveller' and 'nomad' on the grounds that, by avoiding any ethnic content, such labels deny the existence of a specifically Gypsy culture. My decision here is determined to a large degree by participants' choices; although these varied, many preferred the term 'Gypsy', often on the grounds that it distinguished them from 'New Age' or 'New Travellers'. Some participants expressed a preference for the terms 'Rom' or 'Roma', though these themselves are terms that carry different meanings to different groups. Children in schools quite often continued to state a preference for 'Traveller', as the word was not associated with abuse to the same degree as 'Gypsy'.

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