Literacy in English Gypsy Communities: Cultural Capital Manifested as Negative Assets

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The attribution of low literacy levels among Gypsy children to difficulties of access to schools neglects underlying sociocultural explanations. There has been little analysis in reports/studies of Gypsy attitudes toward literacy, nor of outcomes of acquisition. Informed by new literacy theory and by the discourse of previous ethnographic studies, and by acculturation theories, 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 (2005-2006). The article explores attitudes across age groups, highlighting social reasons for resistance to literacy, and argues that policy makers should consider effects on group membership and ways in which formal literacy can constitute a mechanism for disempowerment.

KEYWORDS: acculturation, group boundaries, Gypsies, integration, literacy

An ontological perspective regards learning as constituting issues of identity as well as knowledge, and inevitably, this involves social identification (Lave, 1993; Packer, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Often perceived as a means of empowering the disempowered, the commitment of educators to improve literacy levels of individuals from marginalised groups tends to overlook the wider social and cultural repercussions. At the same time, it also serves to reify schooled notions of literacy, when literacy actually needs to be considered in its wider social, cultural, historical, economic, and political contexts (Barton, 1994; Gee, 2000).

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For proponents of new literacy studies, literacy is perceived as multiple, situated, and concerned with power relations (cf. Gee, 1996; Street, 1993). The term *discourses* encompasses behaviors, activities, values, and beliefs; relates to social power and hierarchical structures; and denotes membership of particular groups (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Literacy practices alter social practices within groups (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Valdes, 1996). Against such a backdrop, literacy acquired at school cannot be perceived as a merely technical or neutral skill.

Anthropological and linguistic studies have moved from deficit theories to communal and cultural patterns in search of explanations for poor performance in school—"patterns in a way of life characteristic of a bounded social group and passed down from one generation to the next" (Eisenhart, 2002, p. 210). As demonstrated by Heath (1983), there are groups where no direct connections are to be found between (standard) literacy and life skills deemed to be necessary. In such contexts, schools come to be perceived as cultures organized around a set of beliefs and values not shared by the students and surrounding communities (i.e. continuity-discontinuity theory) (Jacobs & Jordan, 1993).

Gypsies in the United Kingdom: Social and Educational Context

Estimates suggest that there are between 90,000 and 120,000 Gypsies[1] in England living in caravans (Niner, 2003), though a further 3 times that number might be living in houses (Ivatts, 2005).[2] Gypsies have been residing in the United Kingdom for the past five centuries, for much of that time, operating on the margins of society (Fraser, 1995). During that period, they have pursued an essentially nomadic existence, despite legislation such as the Moveable Dwellings Bills of the late nineteenth century aimed at regulating Gypsy life. Similarly, there has been resistance to attempts to draw them into the educational system, and despite such legislation as the Children's Act (1908) and the Education Act (1944), many traveling Gypsy children continued to have no schooling. In terms of a lifestyle that entailed frequent movement allowing for working patterns, characterized, for instance, by seasonal agricultural labor as well as by a cultural life based around nomadism, engagement with formal education seemed of little relevance to most families. Schooling was also perceived as a threat to Gypsy lifestyle and culture (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1983) and as part of a process of enculturation by a mainstream society that was antipathetic toward Gypsy culture (DES, 1985). Around the start of the 1990s, the estimated percentage of Gypsy children receiving education was as follows: preschool, 5% to 7%; primary, 40%; secondary, 10% to 12% (Taylor, 1988).

One factor here is reluctance on the part of some schools to accept Gypsy children and, in some cases, opposition from mainstream parents. During the course of this study, two head-teachers recounted situations in which Gypsy children had to struggle through picket lines of protesting parents to

get into their schools. Meanwhile, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted is the inspection body for schools in England) identified the nomadic lifestyle as one of the chief obstacles to access and regular attendance in schools, commenting that the education system is "naturally designed for a static population" (Ofsted, 1996, p. 20).

However, by the 1990s, an itinerant lifestyle was becoming more difficult to pursue. Long-term factors had resulted in a drift toward urban areas and to the gradual demise of the traditional *achtin tan* or stopping place (see Fraser, 1995; Kenrick & Bakewell, 1990), whereas a shortage of official sites had been an issue for several decades. The Caravan Sites (Control of Development) Act (1960) in England prevented the construction of new private sites and led to increased harassment and evictions, and although the Caravan Sites Act (1968) gave local authorities a legal obligation to provide caravan sites for Gypsies in England, this was never fully enforced. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994) abolished the Caravan Sites Act, since which time around 5,000 families have been left with no legal home.

A report by the DES (1985) estimated that about 50% of Gypsy families were living on unauthorized and illegal sites as a result of the severe shortage of official sites, often in deprived, ill-maintained, vandalized conditions, under the constant threat of eviction. The report linked living beside industrial estates, refuse tips, or sewage works to Gypsy perceptions of the way in which society viewed them and to their heightened sense of alienation. Such statistics have recently been confirmed more recently (Niner, 2003). Against such a background, it is not surprising that Gypsies and Irish Travellers are more prone to ill-health; that levels of prenatal mortality, still births, and infant mortality are significantly higher than the national average; and that estimates suggest that, on average, Gypsy and Irish Traveller women live 12 years less than women in the general population and Gypsy and Irish Traveller men 10 years less than men in the general population (Crawley, 2003).

Most of the sites visited during the course of the research reported in this article faced a combination of the following problems: poor sanitary conditions, deriving from a lack of basic facilities, such as hot and cold water, mains electricity, refuse removal, and prevalence of rodents; inconvenient locations for access to shops, education, medical care, and other services; and proximity to sources of air and/or sound pollution, in the form, for instance, of main roads, dual carriageways, motorways, air bases, factories, refineries, power stations, chemical plants, sewage works, and rubbish tips. Some were on wasteland, some marshland. Local authorities tend to be fully aware of such situations. It is against these social and historical contexts that the literacy experiences of members of this marginalized group need to be considered.

Literacy in the Context of Boundary Maintenance

Although literacy needs to be considered in an ecological light, it is also important to explore the Gypsy experience in a wider context. There has been a tendency in official school inspection reports in the United Kingdom

(Ofsted, 1999, 2001) to group Gypsy children with those from other minority groups; however, this can obscure specific aspects of their situation. It could be argued that an, at least equally, analogous situation is that of refugee populations. Many Gypsy children enter the education system from environments that are still insulated from mainstream society. Moreover, many come from a lifestyle that, in recent decades, has been significantly disrupted by socioeconomic change and political legislation (Hawes & Perez, 1995; Levinson & Sparkes, 2004). The repercussions of restrictions on movement might lead to an analysis in the context of *displaced* identities (Hall, 1993), whereas the economic need for a different type of (and possibly, more intimate) engagement with the non-Gypsy world might be a catalyst for the emergence of *flexible*, *multiple*, and *multifaceted* identities (Bhabha, 1994; Rassool, 1999). The problem here is that the emergence of such identities would appear to require a certain degree of accommodation and/or acculturation (see McBrien, 2005; Rudmin, 2003), and for many Gypsies, either can be synonymous with assimilation (see Gheorghe 1997; Liegeois, 1987).

The distinctions between the above concepts were significant in Andereck's (1992) study of Irish Travellers in a Mississippi school. Emphasizing that conformity was not synonymous with assimilation, Andereck suggested that students were expected at school to *acculturate* (i.e., to change cultural patterns, moving toward *assimilation*). Acculturation would show signs of conformity, by which definition, Travellers did not show signs of acculturation. Travellers were perceived, instead, as an *accommodating* group, only hiding their ethnicity to reduce conflict. An alternative perspective here would be to view accommodation and acculturation as bridges toward assimilation.

Earlier studies propose that, broadly, there might be three patterns of adaptation (segmented assimilation) (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993), entailing: first, upward mobility/assimilation into the middle-class majority; second, upward mobility and ethnic solidarity; and third, unsuccessful assimilation/downward spiral, associated with cultural dissonance. These patterns would seem to constitute an analysis centered on an essentially economic nexus. In this discussion, the preference is to focus on the social dimensions, with particular regard to community membership. Based on the responses of those participating in this extended study, this is where tensions are most evident.

The increasing preoccupation, as reflected in official reports, among policy makers in the United Kingdom, with the need for young Gypsies to acquire literacy skills, overlooks the wider sociopsychological implications. If literacy acquisition is perceived as a sign system that structures mental activity (Vygotsky, 1986), and fosters new cognitive processes/specialized forms of thinking (Engeström, 1998; Scribner and Cole, 1981), there would seem an element of prescience about misgivings on the part of Gypsy parents with regard to greater involvement in schooling.

There are significant issues here of intergenerational cohesion, though the eschewal of literacy is also about boundary maintenance—"The persistence

of ethnic groups in contact implies not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows for the persistence of cultural differences" (Barth, 1998, p. 16). Oppositional cultural theory has highlighted the manner in which many minority groups have come to define themselves through opposition to the dominant group (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Such opposition is liable to be manifested in the rejection of mainstream cultural forms as well as in the performance of distinctive cultural acts. Among the most salient of Gadje cultural practices, in the traditional Romani view, is the use of literacy.

Orientations Toward Literacy Within Gypsy Communities

The actual needs and preferences of Romani communities, families, and group members; the reasons for the traditional apprehensions about schooling; and more specifically, the mistrust of literacy, have been tangential (and often unmentioned) aspects of official reports in the United Kingdom over the past few decades concerning Gypsy education. In these reports, and particularly those generated by Ofsted, literacy has been identified as a central issue (cf. DES, 1967, 1985; Ofsted, 1996, 1999). Literacy levels amongst various Gypsy groups across Europe have been reported as being extremely low (Liegeois, 1987, 1997), and in the United Kingdom at least, there has been a tendency to interpret this primarily in the context of access (or the lack of it) to the mainstream educational system (see Ofsted, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2003). It might be noted here that the national policy drivers emanate from a single (and narrow) construct of literacy, and certainly not from a concept of potential *literacies*.

It is difficult to provide reliable figures with regard to literacy rates amongst European Gypsies. Liegeois and Gheorghe (1995) estimated an illiteracy rate of up to 90% of the adult Romani population across the European Community (EC) countries, only 30% to 40% of Roma/Gypsy children attending school with a degree of regularity, more than half receiving no schooling at all, a "very small percentage" reaching secondary level. Their conclusion was that "scholastic achievement, particularly as regards the achievement of functional literacy, is not in keeping with the amount of time spent in school" (p. 30). Fraser (1995) provided almost identical figures.

There would seem to be general agreement as to an increase of demand, as well as a growing need for literacy (Derrington & Kendall, 2004; Kiddle, 1999), for such purposes as writing estimates and receipts; reading plans and manuals, applying for driving licenses and insurance; and filling in forms for health, employment, and social security. Increasing levels of contact between Gypsies and non-Gypsies over the past few decades have increased both the demand for education and an awareness among Gypsies of the relative deprivation resulting from illiteracy. Ivatts (1972) suggested that Gypsies also viewed literacy as a weapon, "a further aid to manipulating our society more successfully towards their end" (p. 5). The acknowledgement of a growing demand for school as a supplement to home

education was noted by Kiddle (1999), who added that a "concern for basic literacy" was the primary motive of Gypsy parents for sending their children to school, and despite otherwise positive attitudes towards schooling, Bhopal (2004) also encountered some preference among parents for limited engagement, allowing for the acquisition of basic skills.

The perception of a need for literacy would appear to have become more salient than the fear of its inherent dangers, against a background in which "Roma/Gypsies' age-old adaptability is currently being tried to the limits, and their established strategies for adapting to their environment are becoming inadequate. Illiteracy no longer provides protection from the aggression of other cultures as channelled through the school" (Liegeois & Gheorghe, 1995, p. 30).

Up to recent times, most English Gypsies would have subscribed to the view that the relationship between academic success and life success is arbitrary. Indeed, many of those involved in this research study (to be described later in this article) underlined the lack of correlation between the two, whereas others have emphasized the independence and freedom acquired through the ability to utilize a range of skills. As Duke (age 20s) reflected, "I can turn me 'and to anything: tree surgery, tarmacking . . . PVC, stick-up drains, and all that; 'ow to buy and sell scrap."

The varied nature of those skills has been outlined by a number of observers (see, e.g., Lee & Warren, 1991; Okely, 1983; Smith, 1997) and includes understanding of local economies and their populations, manual dexterity, mechanical ingenuity, highly developed memory, salesmanship and bargaining skills, home and care skills, knowledge of herbs, skills with horses and other animals, and expertise about metals. Such skills were equated with cultural tradition and community membership and, as such, can be viewed as identity markers; yet many pertain to economic sectors in which opportunities have become restricted, and in conjunction with limitations on movement, this has led to a need for diversification.

Liegeois and Gheorghe (1995) suggested that the growing demand for literacy skills has been due not only to economic factors but to "social and psychological reasons" as well. At the same time, there is evidence that the restrictions placed on central cultural traditions, such as nomadism, have resulted in a need for the maintenance of boundaries through other identity markers (Levinson, 2005; Levinson & Sparkes, 2004).

Difficulties for children who remain within the education system emanate from the discontinuities and paradoxes between the cultural worlds of home and school (Derrington & Kendall, 2004). Despite an increased demand from Gypsies for education, there remains an awareness of the cultural risks. Lee and Warren (1991) have highlighted reports of the dilemma among the Kalderas, a group of Eastern European Romanis resident in the United States, who desire the skills of literacy for computation and know that schools have a "virtual monopoly" on teaching those skills, yet fear the consequences of participation within the system. In common with Gypsies elsewhere, they have resisted attempts to integrate them in the education system, partly because they

find school practices to be irreconcilable with their own cultural beliefs, and partly as they do not wish to be "Americanized" and "de-culturized."

Lee and Warren (1991, p. 317) concurred with Liegeois's view that, until recently, Gypsies felt that they had managed perfectly well without literacy, but now were showing "a cautious desire to acquire a few useful elements as quickly as possible within well-defined parameters." There emerges, too, a restricted concept of literacy, a demand for a literacy without *frills*, one that will provide for everyday needs. This might be attained within the primary years; if not, some combination of factors, entailing the social costs of secondary schooling and the economic gains of alternative activities for teenagers, would still appear to make it preferable for many Gypsy families to shun education at secondary level, a pattern that has been the case for a number of generations. Okely (1983) found that even amongst those who expressed a desire for literacy and numeracy, few were interested in secondary education, and among those who had attended school, hardly any did so after the age of eleven or twelve. Formal examinations and qualifications have been viewed traditionally as being "unnecessary and irrelevant" (Cannon & the Travellers of Thistlebrook, 1989, p. 36).

Equivocal feelings about literacy, specifically, have been attributed to apprehension as to its wider effects. The potential social and psychological costs of literacy have been made with reference to other groups. It has been reported amongst Australian Aborigines, for example, that whereas attitudes toward language were constantly being renegotiated, "they were closely intertwined with issues regarding self-evaluation, group membership, indigenous group solidarity, perceived relative status and aspirations of a group" (Taylor, 1997, p. 68). The acquisition of literacy had become associated with the acceptance of "the dominant society's specified values and behaviours," and achieving a report of language and literacy competence became "essentially an exercise in assimilation and surveillance." The maintenance of "distinctive styles of language-use" among Aboriginal Australians was seen as an example of "passive resistance" against the dominant society's value system, ways of life, and modes of thinking and behaving (Taylor, 1997, p. 76). In the context of American Indian education, McCarty and Watahomigie (1998) argued that indigenous language education should be "historically situated and as such, viewed as both an affirmation of self-determination and an act of resistance to linguistic oppression" (p. 309).

In effect, this discourse is not just about relative power; it pertains to cultural survival. For many Gypsy groups, the maintenance of a nonliterate tradition has become institutionalized, serving as a means of sustaining nonacculturation (Hancock, 2000). According to Hancock (1975), this operates in specific ways: restricting time spent in schools means limiting both teacher and (non-Gypsy) peer group influence, illiteracy impedes socialization toward the mainstream culture and obstructs identification with historical and cultural heroes, illiteracy protects the position of Romani as first language, and illiteracy constitutes a barrier to access to the majority culture through an occupational route.

The historical tendency for "educated" Gypsies to leave their communities (Fonseca, 1996) creates a situation in which the acquisition of literacy is a highly charged, political act, whereby the individual appears to seek identification with another culture; not only does this entail a difficult path, but it also represents the adoption of a code to an alien, hostile world. Reiss (1975, p. 87) suggested a pattern whereby an initial attempt was made by Gypsies to gain literacy skills, so as to use them to outwit the *gadje* (non-Gypsy),[3] skills that it was assumed might be mastered "as quickly as it takes to sort aluminium from tin." When such skills proved to be elusive, however, they were quickly perceived as "as magical territory, part of the scorned gauje value system, something to be indignantly suffered, or rejected."

The traditional compromise allows for partial engagement with literacy, and it suffices for just a few members of the group to master "the informal and prestigeless task of knowing how to use a pen" (Piasere, as cited in Liegeois, 1987, p. 159). Nevertheless, attitudes vary both between and within groups, with some group members perceiving the ability to write as enviable, a "powerful tool," affording "considerable cachet" to the individual concerned (Liegeois, 1987).

Lifestyle differences are of possible significance here; some Gypsies associate the growth of literacy with a decline in the speaking of Romani, whereas others connect it to sedentarization. Indeed, such views are often supported by evidence, and in Poland, for example, it has been reported that Gypsies no longer lead a nomadic life, and the number of illiterates has considerably fallen (Fonseca, 1996). Liegeois (1987) considered it probable that literacy was more important among sedentary Travellers than it was for nomads. However, in view of the difficulties in distinguishing between "nomadic" and "sedentary" groups, any precise analysis becomes problematic. Some families, for example, settle for brief periods (Hawes & Perez, 1995; Levinson & Sparkes, 2004). Many prefer not to discuss their movements. Even among those who have settled, a deep suspicion of literacy can persist, as reflected, for instance, in the belief that "when you learn to read and write, you lose your memory" (Kiddle, 1999, p. 65), and that literacy is "inimical to the development of memory and intelligence—a skill for servants and secretaries, not for businessmen like themselves" (Liegeois, 1987, p. 60).

Gypsy Attainment Within School-Based Constructions of Literacy

Gypsy Traveller children have been singled out as "the group most at risk in the education system" (Ofsted, 1999), and the level of concern is, to some degree, reflected in the number of reports on the topic in recent years (Ofsted, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2003). *Traveller* is a generic term in such reports used to describe a number of communities, some of which constitute minority ethnic groups. *Traveller* is used to refer to English and Welsh Gypsy groups, as well as Irish and Scottish Travellers, Show-People (Fairground and Circus communities), and New or New Age Travellers.

Despite increasing levels of participation in schools over the past two to three decades, the achievements of Traveller pupils were reported (Ofsted, 1996) as still being "well below average," "poor language skills" being identified as the major factor in these performance levels. Fifty percent of Traveller children, "especially those from Gypsy Traveller backgrounds," were described by Ofsted as beginning (at Key Stage 2 [ages 7-11]) "to demonstrate a level of weakness in basic language skills that undermines their achievement across many of the National Curriculum subjects" (Ofsted, 1996, p. 17). Such findings have been more or less replicated by subsequent reports (Ofsted, 1999, 2003; see also Derrington & Kendall, 2004). According to one survey, cited by Ofsted (2003), 33% of Traveller pupils were gaining Level 2 in English at the end of Key Stage 1 (ages 6-7), as against a national average of 84% to 86%, whereas at Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14), 16% of Traveller pupils gained a Level 5 plus at English, compared to a national average of 64%. Derrington and Kendall (2004) cited similar differentials between Gypsy and mainstream pupils. In most official reports there has been a tendency to concentrate explanations around issues of attendance and access, though more salient, perhaps, are the contradictions arising from the desire to achieve literacy and resistance to the school agenda (Kiddle, 1999), leading to the situation in which children, ultimately, "succeed through failing" (Kenny, 1997).

A revealing aspect of official reports (see, e.g., Ofsted, 2001, 2003) is the continued choice of the term *Travelling pupils*, a descriptor that appears to place one aspect of lifestyle as being central to identity,[4] a corollary of which is the implication that the major barrier to the acquisition of literacy is fluctuating attendance, due to a nomadic lifestyle. Although it is inevitable that interrupted schooling has played a significant part in delaying the acquisition of formal literacy skills, the story is far more complex than this: There is a core of underlying attitudes/values, forged over many generations, that would militate against the acquisition of formal literacy whatever the attendance rates of those concerned.

Although for most current Gypsy youngsters (those born in the United Kingdom), academic difficulties may not relate to the mismatch between home and school languages, such as the case in parts of Eastern Europe (Fonseca, 1996), there remain factors that might place Gypsy children in a disadvantaged position, such as the use of dialects that belong to other areas (Acton & Kenrick, 1984; Kiddle, 1999). Reger and Gleason's study (1991) highlighted the need to focus not only on the actual languages and dialects used by Gypsy children at school and home but also the style and purposes of language use in each context. Romani is acquired "through contact rather than direct instruction" (Smith, 1997, p. 247). In the view of Piasere (as cited in Liegeois, 1987), language for Gypsies is not an "instrument of conceptual analysis" but a "basic means of communication and interaction." Written communication is seen as being "far less persuasive and expressive than person-to-person action" (Piasere, as quoted in Liegeois, 1987, p. 158). A common feature across groups (see, e.g., Gay y Blasco, 1999; Liegeois, 1986)

and integral to a sense of self, is the belief in the superiority of a set of practices and values that are often termed by insiders as the "Gypsy way." Despite efforts in recent times to standardize the language (Fraser, 1995), Romani dialects have remained resistant to literary forms (Acton, Marselos, & Szego, 2000; Hancock, 2000), and it is possible that for group members this affords Romani a certain superiority, even purity.

Despite Labov's (1969/2000) argument that the notion of *verbal deprivation* was part of the mythology of educational psychology, any skepticism about such theories did not prevent their continued dissemination. In the case of Gypsy children, a deficit view was historically situated, as reflected by Reiss (1975):

> It must be stated that observations made of travellers regularly in school, who could be expected to have made strides in the direction of literacy, suggested that they were suffering from what can figuratively be described as an acute communal dyslexia. This is worrying not least because literacy is the one area where it can confidently be expected that the children have high motivation to learn. (p. 32)

Reiss suggested several possible explanations for this, such as lack of literacy in the home, poor attendance rates, and the quantity and quality of tuition:

> It might also be that the traveller child has a more specific syndrome of learning difficulties with reading and writing: he may be occupationally long-sighted—with an eye for spotting possible scrap sources and unmetalled roads at a long distance. He may have learnt from parents various strategies for covering up illiteracy or even have developed an emotional blockage to learning the basic skills. (p. 32)

That environmental conditions should play an important role in learning behaviors seems plausible enough, but the suggestion seems nebulous that these are liable to determine cognitive functioning through the construction of a syndrome, "acute communal dyslexia." Reiss's (1975) perspective was consistent with the psychometric testing that was taking place in that decade across Europe, "which were rarely if ever adapted for use with Gypsy, or for that matter, other minority children" (Liegeois, 1987, p. 70).

Such testing had significant consequences for those involved. The *village test*, described by Liegeois (1987), in which children had to put into place such objects as houses, fences, and public buildings, was utilized not only to evaluate knowledge but to assess personality structure. Despite the researcher's own reservations, Gypsy children tested by MacCallum (1975, as cited by Taylor, 1988) were referred to the Child Guidance Service "because of backwardness and retardation" and placed in special classes.

Childs's (1976) research on ten 4- to 5-year-olds was used to make generalizations about Gypsies as a group. Childs suggested that the poor verbal contact between Gypsy parents and their children was not only dysfunctional

for the adjustment of the children at school, but also for future adjustment to the majority society in general. The choice of such terms as *poor* and *dysfunctional* reflect the ethnocentric position of the writer, whose use of subjective criteria results in conclusions that are in direct conflict with subsequent evidence (see, e.g., Hughes & Cousins, 1989; Reger & Gleason, 1991).

Davies's study (1976, as cited by Taylor, 1988), comparing the respective uses of English by Gypsy and non-Gypsy children, tested the hypothesis that, in their use of language, Gypsy children were "egocentric," poor communicators, who tend to lack awareness of a hearer's perspective. In none of the above was any allowance made for possible cultural bias or context—for instance, the fact that the children were tested, individually, by non-Gypsies.

In interpreting a *difference of orientation* toward language as a *deficit*, and in the intimation of some sort of parental negligence, any contextual evidence was simply overlooked. Gypsy children may well enter the education system from a background in which they have had little contact with the written word, but the wider cultural orientation toward language and learning within different Gypsy communities constitutes the more significant issue.

Although it is true that the discourse has moved on in the intervening years, from cultural *disadvantage* to cultural *dissonance*, in which there is perceived a lack of congruence between patterns at home and school, it is important to bear in mind the potential impact on deeply held suspicions on the part of Gypsy parents toward the educational establishment. The isolation and humiliation they suffered at school (Ivatts & Janes, 1975) are reflected, at the very least, in ambivalence toward the education system and the literate non-Gypsy milieu that, to some degree, has been passed on to the next generation. Amongst Gypsies in the United Kingdom, such perceptions are only likely to be supported by any contact with Eastern European Gypsies, whose negative experiences of the education system have been reported elsewhere (Barany, 2001; Forray, 2003).

Liegeois (1997) viewed intercommunal relations between Gypsy and non-Gypsy groups as being pivotal to the educational attainment of Gypsy children. Andereck's (1992) study of Irish Travellers in a Mississippi school found that most of the *success* would have appeared to have occurred relatively early in the school careers of the Traveller children, when they were reported as being most integrated, after which time school seemed to have become more of a forum for the assertion of boundaries. The hostility encountered by Gypsy children remains a major obstacle to involvement in schools, as is reflected by testimony from numerous participants in the studies reported below.

The Current Study: An Ethnographic Approach to Understanding Literacy in Gypsy Cultures

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.[5] This was followed (2005-2006) 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. However, the accumulating data engendered a sharper focus as the study proceeded. With regard to the topic under discussion in this paper, during the latter stages of the 1996 to 2000 study, and continuing into the 2005 to 2006 follow-up study, the focus shifted to social reasons for resistance to standard literacy on the part of Gypsy students. A need became apparent to investigate the home/school interface, as well as to explore connections between particular local/communal practice and a larger global, context of patterned practices.

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- to 11-year-olds] and two secondary schools [11- to 16-year-olds]), during which time 47 Gypsy youngsters were interviewed and observed in classroom and playground settings. Access was gained to these schools via the officer of the relevant County Traveller Education Service, an organization set up to provide liaison between families and schools, and for which, according to leading Romani Studies authority, Ian Hancock (personal communication, November 10, 2006), there is no U.S. equivalent.

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, and engagement with educational tasks. Playground observation was conducted at the 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. These took place within the school and normally lasted 30 minutes. The children were given the choice as to whether the interviews were tape-recorded. The majority of those involved gave their consent for the interviews to be tape-recorded. Informal discussions were also conducted with these and the other Gypsy children during break times and recorded as field notes.

Most of the approaches used in the initial 4-month pilot study in schools, including the use of questionnaires, were rejected in the final analysis on the grounds that this process had led to simplifications in terms of subsequent analysis. However, other data, collected as a participant observer working with small groups, was utilized, particularly in the selection of subsequent interview questions.

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. Due to the variety of backgrounds among the children encountered in the first phase of the study,[6] the decision was made to visit as many different sites as possible. 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. The total number of site visits was 36. Access to 10 sites was initially negotiated via fieldworkers employed by the County Traveller Education Services. Access was also facilitated on some sites by Gypsy children who had already participated in the school-based phase of the study. 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 often seemed an outcome of a desire on the part of those involved to claim greater control of the researcher-researched relationship. At times, this was manifested in the setting up of meetings and subsequently not being there at the arranged time. On other occasions, participants informed me that they had decided to give me no further information. Finally, there were times when participants had simply moved on to other places.

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). Another issue was the way in which Gypsy children were described as *colonizing* particular playground areas. Hence, specific time was allocated to observation of the use of space in the home setting. Similarly, the patterns of play among Gypsy children had emerged as being distinctive, in both the data gathered and the literature on the subject, to the extent that the claim has been made that "Gypsy children do not know how to play" (DES, 1985). Further time was set aside for the observation of general play activities, and also the visit to one site of a play-bus (Levinson, 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 ranged from 15 minutes to up to 2 hours in duration. They took place in a number of contexts, usually inside trailers, but in a number of instances outside trailers, and on occasions in houses, cars, or pubs. Almost without exception, a preference was expressed not to have the conversations recorded. At one level, this was one way of retaining control over the encounter. At another level, there were clearly anxieties that individuals might be identified via having their voices recorded and that recordings could be used against them for "official" purposes.

During interviews an informal style was adopted, and the format of the interview was flexible, ranging from thematic or semistructured to unstructured in nature, with the adult Gypsies involved. This was a pragmatic strategy in dealing with (initially, at least) reluctant respondents (see, e.g., Adler & Adler, 2002). In certain instances, participants spoke most freely when *they* selected the topics for discussion and framed them within a life history context. This nonhierarchical, dynamic, and fluid frame to the interviews was important in establishing trust and rapport with the participants.

Nevertheless, certain topics remained problematic. For example, when discussing home life, a number of participants became suspicious, as if a boundary were being transgressed by an outsider. Observation in the home setting proved a particularly challenging task among participants interviewed on a single occasion—and these often involved groups that were still following nomadic patterns. Even with participants visited on several occasions, it was necessary to negotiate a framework for observation. A useful strategy here was to try to ensure that observation was ensued by discussion of issues that had arisen. On certain occasions, too, it was agreed that joint observation should occur, involving certain children in conjunction with myself. These related to school issues, and parents sometimes consented to this approach, expressing the hope that I might monitor the way in which teachers were responding to concerns they had raised. These often concerned issues of bullying and exposure to elements of the curriculum (such as sex education) from which they had requested their child's withdrawal.

Each of the above strategies enabled participants to feel that they had a stake in the research process, as well as facilitating the growth of trust. At the same time, they allowed for a comparison of (a) child/adult and (b) insider/outsider perspectives.

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, 15 of whom came from Romani backgrounds, the remaining 3 being fieldworkers with specific roles in Gypsy education. These in-depth interviews took place in home settings, and during this second study, the focus was on the consequences of literacy acquisition, its uses, and the wider social issues facing Gypsy youngsters who have remained within the education system when most others in their peer group have left.

Description, Interpretation, and Analysis of Data

As Romani studies has been an undertheorized area in the past, it was not an option to rely to any significant degree on existing literature, either as a guide to research strategies or to interpretation of data, and a constructivist approach (Denzin, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) seemed more helpful, depending on triangulated empirical materials that are *trustworthy* (i.e., *credible*, *dependable*, and *confirmable*).

Attempts were made to check on the *trustworthiness* of responses by returning to participants, whenever possible, to check both what was said and interpretations. An effort was made to identify key informants, and to utilize these to test hypotheses arising from other interviews and observation. This could be perceived as empowering some participants at the expense of others, but it proved of critical importance in the context of an outsider approaching closed, often defensive, communities. It also allowed for negotiated interpretations of events witnessed, and wherever possible, those competing meanings were included in the reporting of data.

The structure of the initial study (1996-2000), investigating reasons for difficulties encountered by Gypsy children in school, constructed its own discourse. Originally, interviews were coded on a thematic basis within that framework, the themes emerging from literature on the topic. Subsequently, there was experimentation with alternative thematic groupings, and this allowed for different analyses; and from a very early stage, the process moved away from identifying key themes, coding them as such, and then testing them, to a more flexible approach. Nevertheless, the discourse that emerged from interviews imposed its own restrictions, remaining essentially *problem-driven*. The difference between the first model and that which came later was that the focus moved toward a more holistic analysis of education, embracing home life, cultural dissonance between school and home, and the impact of schooling on identity.

Reading took place at the same time as data collection, so that there could be a comparison between empirical evidence, gathered through observation and interview, and that gleaned from the appropriate literature; and in this sense, the intention was to make the research process more integrated and reflexive, as suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (1994). Extensive field notes proved an invaluable tool here.

At the same time, the use of field notes highlighted other issues, in particular, the problematic nature of narrative realism and traditional naturalistic ethnography. The impact of the researched on the researcher, the affective and emotional elements (see Lather, 1991), were reflected in log entries such as the following:

FIELDNOTES, MAY 1997, SITE G, CORNWALL

The next interview took place in what might at best be described as a shack, some might say hovel, a building that looked as if it had once

> been DIY pre-fab, as if it were about to fall apart at any moment, with a range in one corner for heating, and presumably, cooking, bits of rug covering the floor, a window that was jammed a home-made door, and washing and toilet facilities across a yard. The grandparents were sitting close to the range when I arrived. Alongside them were their grandson and granddaughter, the latter of whom had been sick. It resembled one of Dorothea Lange's photographs of the Depression, or a scene from "The Grapes of Wrath," with a kind of permanent impermanence. The scene filled me with a sense of guilt—the role of objective researcher, detached from context, is not easy when one is confronted such poverty of surroundings and by the threadbare clothing of participants. Instead of concentrating on my interview schedule, I could not help but wonder as to what might have been lost by Gypsies through adaptation to an essentially sedentary existence on sites. What did I know of this world? What right did I have to come barging in with my questions? Gradually, I was struck by the simple dignity of these people. The old man's pride in ownership—("This house, every little screw, belongs to me. I love me own property.")—increased my sense of humility. I began to notice other things: the pictures of children on the walls; the neatly sewn-up clothes, etc.

Considering the above, if I were less (mechanically) effective as a researcher than I might (or should) have been, it should come as no surprise. I allowed the grandfather the luxury of reminiscing at length about life in the old days, even though I suspected that, overall, his wife probably had more meaningful observations to make in the context of my own research.

In theory, this allowed for writing oneself in and out of the text (Sparkes, 1995). Yet although my intention was not to "experience life and then write science" (Krizek, 1998, p. 93), the reality is that it is not always easy to move between empathetic and analytical approaches as if one were merely switching between lenses. Of course, the blurring of boundaries between data collection and analysis is not necessarily perceived as a weakness (Marvasti, 2004) and can, indeed, be seen as useful as a means of capturing *thick descriptions* (Geertz, 1988). Eisner (1990, 1991) has argued that *objectivity* is a concept built upon a faulty epistemology that leads to an unrealizable ideal in its ontological state. It is more important, and realistic, to recognize the transaction between self and world. In Eisner's (1991) view, this allows for a more pluralistic, tentative, and dynamic conception of knowledge, one that recognizes that *doxa* (belief), not *episteme* (knowledge), is all we have.

During both study phases described here, 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. The very act of structuring interviews produces its own narrative, perhaps, no more than one truth among many; in the selection and sequencing of information, we alter meaning; in creating meanings, we marginalize and exclude others; the very process of writing is reductive; realities are invariably more dissonant than their depictions.

Data from interviews and observation taken from both study phases (1996-2000, 2005-2006) are presented here. All the names used here are pseudonyms, except in cases where participants specifically requested otherwise.

Connotations of Home- and School-Based Literacies

The perception of low literacy skills as the central reason for modest educational achievement (Ofsted, 1996, 1999, 2003) glosses over any issues relating to the breadth—or lack of it, in the National Curriculum; there is no acknowledgement of skills not tested; no suggestion of different types of literacy—literacies that may have traditionally been excluded from the discourse of schooling (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000).

In this regard, any advantages from the home background are likely to remain underutilized in the classroom. As a result of their background, it might be fair to assume that Gypsy children actually start off with an advantage in certain linguistic skills, such as arguing and negotiating. They are certainly likely to be more experienced in listening to adult talk (Okely, 1983). In classrooms, where long periods of time are spent by children in a passive capacity and where tasks are handed out rather than negotiated, it seems equally fair to assume that the Gypsy child might be, at least initially, ill at ease. During the course of the studies described here, a number of teachers and fieldworkers have spoken of an apparently short concentration span on the part of Gypsy children:

> He [Isaac] was never disruptive. I'd watch him. He'd just sit there. Unless she [the teacher] said "Isaac," to draw him in, he would not absorb the information. I've decided the reason why is the way they are at home: unless someone said, "are you listening?" he [Isaac] would tune out. I've heard mothers shouting, "I'm talking to you!" (Liz, fieldworker)

Some of the older participants suggested that disparities between language use at home and school proved difficult to reconcile:

> I think it [school] ruined us. To be perfectly honest I think it took a lot away from us 'cos we had to lead a double life—we used to sit all the time all day in that school when we was talking to the teacher and the kids it had to be in English. Bur it's so easy to go back into Romani. If we lapsed talking to them they'd go, "Eh? What? Pardon? What do that mean?" It give us a lot to worry about. (Maggie, age 60s).

People of all ages tended to speak more highly of Romani. Particular reference was made to its importance as a secret code, and its use when non-Gypsies were present to convey information between family and group members that would be advantageous.

Others have affirmed the importance attached to the spoken act; conversely, they have been skeptical as to the value of any agreement made in writing. As Jem (age 50s) summed it up, "We give our word and shake hands;

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we don't need no written contract." This view was supported by a number of other participants: "I've got these papers, bloody marvellous things; all official, like, done out by lawyers, what give me rights to my own land. Didn't stop them *gavvers* [police] and other bastards from evicting me" (Jake, age 40s). Far from seeing literacy as a tool for liberation, such participants viewed it as a means of perpetuating the status quo, through the enactment of the social practices that instantiate it (Gee, 1996).

For many Gypsies, the written word is the code of the *Gadje*, the means of entrapment—as manifested, for instance, in legal documents that purport to grant ownership of land, but then limit its use; the supposed *rights* enshrined in the written word amount to *restrictions*. Still more dangerous, the written word represents a route to assimilation, *gadjefication*, which is evident in Fonseca's account (1996, pp. 3-9) of the life of Papusza, a Polish Gypsy poet-singer who had learned how to read and write from non-Gypsy villagers. Publication of her poems led to her being associated with assimilationist policies. Despite her efforts to cancel publication of her writing (at one point she set light to all her 300 poems), she was tried before a Gypsy court, proclaimed *mahrime* (ritually unclean), and banished. After a spending time in a psychiatric hospital, she spent her remaining years in isolation, and died "shunned by her own generation and unknown to the next."

I happened to mention this story to a group of participants who had previously expressed support for education. They were completely unsympathetic toward the woman involved. Their view was that she had "turned against her own" and that she must have known the consequences of her actions. Even writing down her poems, they said, was a *gadje* thing to do. There are several aspects to this: an aversion to books—less for any intrinsic reason regarding what might be contained within them than for the connotations of the medium itself with the non-Gypsy world; books are symbols of an oppressive external world; there is a suspicion of anyone perceived as collaborating with that outside world, which is connected to such "heresies" as taking up the printed word; there is also the approval of uncompromising measures taken against individuals deemed guilty of having betrayed their heritage; and not least, a lack of sympathy for the potential impact on such individuals. It is indicative of an historical, group position, which does not exactly form an incentive to become literate.

In general, antipathy has been expressed by participants in these studies less toward the written word than to books, though this was less marked in younger participants. The complaint that education is *bad*, as reading books prevents youngsters from doing more worthwhile tasks, has been echoed by several participants. Daniel (19) confessed to feeling guilty about reading for pleasure ("They'd think I was just wasting time"). Callum (age 11) said that his father would throw out any schoolbooks if he found him with them at home. Callum's father concurred with this statement, adding that children could learn much more at home by helping with jobs. Dorcas (age 30s) was equivocal. She argued that it was crucial for Gypsies to learn how to read and write, but having encouraged all her children to go to school, so as "to get

some learning—and not be as thick as their dad," she said she was uneasy about seeing their schoolbooks at home. And whereas Rocky (age 20s) insisted that he was going to ensure that his children "got their rights" and went to school, he subsequently added that "the longer they spend up there (school), the stupider they get." A number of adults said that they would discard or throw away books, as they were for school not home. One or two confessed that they felt some shame at being unable to help their children.

Such an aversion might be due in part to negative memories of schooldays, when parents themselves had felt inadequacy when confronted by texts. An alternative explanation, operating on a group rather than an individual level, is that books are seen as being detrimental to traditional Romani learning and incompatible with the Gypsy way of life. The parents of Crystal (age 11) stated that, although it was necessary for children to go to school, once they got home, they should be outside, playing ("That's our way: natural, healthy"). Yet whereas several participants articulated the view that it was "unhealthy" for children to remain indoors, it seems significant that this complaint was always made in the context of homework or reading, and never with regard to television or video games. It may be relevant here that among many families, although children often have their own television sets, there remains the perception that watching television is a family/communal act, whereas reading is an individual/solitary one.

Others were forthright in their belief in the superiority of learning acquired in the home environment, contrasting those skills to a school-based education:

> 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. At school all they learn is to write down you would do stuff if you were out there; what use is that? (Julie, 19)

This is not simply about the jobs/tasks concerned but about links to alternative ways of doing things and to specific Rom strategies for solving difficulties:

> The problem is getting around. Reading signs. Billy went all the way from Taunton to St. Austell the other day. How do Gypsy boys get around? You tell me. Going all over Britain. How do they read the signs? I tell you, 'e can look at maps; 'e can't read them, but 'e can understand them. (Heather, age 50s)

Some have highlighted the discontinuities and contradictions between home and school, and at times, this seems to connect to feelings of nostalgia about the past:

> I think all this education has made us weaker. When I went to that school it absolutely terrified us. It broke our spirit 'cos it felt like the

> rest of yer life you'd be put into schools. I always felt like the coun-
> tryside, the world itself, was our classroom: we learned so much from
> our parents and grandparents about everything. They'd go into a wet
> field and pick a' armful of reeds and then they'd come home, and
> when they'd chat and fry a bit of *Joe Gray*, they'd got half a dozen
> baskets made. (Maggie, 60s)

> The learnin' the chavvies [children] do at home is not like at school.
> With us they're pickin' things up all the time—without knowin'.
> (Estelle, 40s)

Much school-based learning was viewed as being pointless. More seri-
ously, it was associated with the erosion of more important knowledge
gained at home and to the loss of group cohesion. On a utilitarian level, a
common argument offered against literacy is that no economic benefits
would seem to accrue:

> My Rocky came out of school not reading, but great at Arithmetic. 'E's
> learnt more now; 'e can read now. The other day he read this sign on
> a bottle, a great, long, complicated word. . . . But what I'm saying is
> 'is problems with English never stopped 'im from making a living.
> (Heather, age 50s)

> As long as you can add up, you're all right. Mum and Dad can't read,
> nor Gran, or my uncles and aunts. They get by. Dad can look at a
> place on the map and take you straight there. (Duke, age 20s)

> You look around here—you see many who could not read or write
> if their lives depended on it. Fred, Henry . . . and they're all doing
> very well, thank you very much. (Jack, age 30s)

Jack's argument is supported by evidence relating both to Gypsies and
other groups. Okely (1983) reported that literacy occurred least among the
wealthiest Gypsy families. Graff's (1979) study of the role of literacy in
Canadian history indicated that illiteracy was less of a factor than ethnicity
in determining economic and political success, a conclusion also drawn in
other contexts (see, e.g., Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gilmore, 1985; Street,
1984/1994). In the absence of any obvious correlation between literacy and
economic success, the impetus to acquire the former will be held in check.

Literacy as a Group Matrix

Despite the unequivocal view, expressed by a number of teachers and
Traveller education fieldworkers contributing to these studies, that formal lit-
eracy could be only beneficial for Gypsy youngsters, the ambiguous posi-
tions taken by Gypsies themselves sometimes seemed to embrace wider
perspectives, suggesting that, for Rom and non-Rom alike, literacy could be
both empowering and disempowering:

> It was a very rare thing, generations back, some of our people *could* read and write. How they got that, where it came from, I don't know. They'd never gone to school. Maybe missionaries. The most famous one used to go round in a wagon converting, in the New Forest—that little tin church. If they knew somebody could read and write, they'd go to them. It's only recent history the ordinary gadje could read and write. It was kept from them. Even scripture was kept from them and the Latin—they did that, on purpose, kept the scriptures in Latin so nobody could learn to read it. All that was to keep control. But it's not the be all and end all to be able to read and write. I'd say nowadays it's an asset, but maybe not in business terms—I think we've all got hidden parts of our brain that we don't use and perhaps not being able to read and write brings out something. Maybe being able to read masks off something. (Robert, age 60s)

Acknowledging changes in recent years, Jem (age 50s) suggested that the acquisition of standard literacy had moved Gypsies away from more "instinctive" ways of thinking; yet at the same time, he suggested that most Gypsy parents now accepted schooling for their children, despite the ensuing "separation of ways between old and young." In fact, home-school interaction constitutes a terrain in which continuities coexist with discontinuities (Reese & Gallimore, 2000), and the variables are introduced further by the current flux in Romani socioeconomic life. Resistance to change can be due to external pressures to conserve certain archetypes:

> When *we* move from wagons to campers they [non-Gypsies] say, *What a pity*! When *they* move from wagons to cars, it's progress. Why isn't it progress with us? (Ian Hancock, 1996)

However, it is also a product of internal conservatism:

> We're dying. [Sixty percent] of our children are marrying Gadjes. . . . In the old days you would never put Ayres with Frankhams or Loverages with Boswells. Now we've forgotten how to make pegs or flowers. I met some Roma people the other day. Said they were tree surgeons. I said, which are deciduous trees, then and which are non-deciduous? They didn't have a bloody clue what the difference was. That's a real education, that is. (Eli Frankham, 1996)

The significance here is the equation between several elements: a formal school-based education, unrelated to actual life skills, intermarriage, and the "death" of the Romani community as an identifiable group.

One aspect of school that has been identified as problematic by a number of participants is the way in which youngsters are isolated from friends and family members according to age and ability. Indeed, the habit of leaving classrooms to check on (and sometimes, assist) other Gypsy children (Levinson & Sparkes, 2005) reflects learning patterns at home, during which the most common element is collaboration. Classroom observation involved

many instances in which Gypsy children seemed to challenge norms involving individualized learning. Among the most negative aspects of school named by Gypsy children were "working in silence," "working alone," and specifically, "tests." Of course, these may well be nominated in a similar way by other children, but for most, this does not entail in the same manner a challenge to implicit cultural values as embodied in learning at home, where training is about equipping families and small groups, rather than individuals, to negotiate the outside world.

Although acknowledging a growing need to acquire some degree of functional literacy, quite a few participants have argued that formal education remains unnecessary, citing instances of family members or friends who have allegedly learned to read from newspapers, road signs, or cereal boxes. Numerous participants have argued that within their group there was no need for more than a few individuals to become literate:

> As a child I could read and write in our language. I never learnt English at home. I get by in English 'cos me old man can read and write. And Dad could. (Denise, age 50s)

> School wasn't really worth it for me. I learned to read and write a little bit. Actually, I can read more than I can write. It's OK cos me 'usband reads and writes. (Julie, age 19)

> We just get by as a group. In my own family they rely on each other. Take my niece—she's eight years of age. Her father and mother get letters and say, "Mary, read that." And Mary reads it. If they need stuff typed up, someone does it. . . . There's always somebody to do your reading and writing. But when it comes to personal letters, it's not so easy. (Sally, age 20s)

> My father is illiterate and my mum can read a bit, but not write or spell. My brother also struggles with basic literacy skills. . . . My reading ability did have some benefits for my family. I could read their and other people's letters for them, fill in forms and I even helped to teach my aunt to read, so she could take her driving test. For this I was paid one comic per week. (Ruth, age 30s)

This collective approach raises issues as to the effect of literacy on roles in relationships, and on the status afforded by its acquisition, as well as on an interdependency, which influences perceptions of the individual and the group. Patterns have varied across families. Some have suggested that it would be preferable for boys to learn a bit while girls were kept away from school; others have given the impression of a greater expectation on daughters to become literate. In the future, they would be able to sort out paperwork for husbands; certainly, this would appear to make sense in many ways, as in numerous contexts, such as education and welfare, it is normally the women who have dealings with the outside world. Perhaps, too, there

is a feeling that it makes the most economic sense for boys to be working with their fathers from as early an age as possible. This is countered to some extent by a traditionally protective attitude toward girls, which has led to the perception of secondary schools, in particular, as a threat.

Nevertheless, in the above cases, sometimes it is males in the family who are the literate ones, sometimes females; sometimes parents, sometimes children: There are no rigid patterns here according to age or gender. On the contrary, there seems to be much flexibility: Whoever acquires skills in written English uses them for others in the family who do not. Such a pattern, reported by Ivatts (1972), appears to persist to varying degrees. Extended-family groups, he noted, had always had one member who could read and write, performing the function of *scribe* to the community. As the concept of literacy goes way beyond the individual, embracing family and group, failure to achieve it on an individual level is not viewed with anything like the same concern as would be the case in mainstream society.

It seems significant that among those participants who have emphasized the potential benefits of literacy, for instance in accessing new types of employment, being able to understand and communicate in formal and official contexts, and in standing up for their rights, most have spoken on the collective level. Such advocates of literacy declared it to be empowering, a tool by which Gypsies will adapt as a group, giving themselves more options. Some participants have alluded to the historic repercussions of failure to acquire literacy on a group level:

> I know many illiterate Travellers who are still breadwinners. But they're victims. (Sally, age 20s)

> We are but objects or devices that Gadjos can manipulate at will—in the world of the written word. (Willie, age 30s)

> We've got to fight this battle with the weapons of the enemy. Literacy has nothing to do with economic success; it's got a lot to do with gaining power. . . . Being a Gypsy doesn't mean that you have to go hawking; nor does it mean you have to accept second best. (John, age 40s)

This use of terms such as *power* and *battle* seems revealing, for the whole issue of (formal/school-based) literacy is merely a substratum, lying beneath an ideological battlefield that ultimately concerns survival, and herein lies a paradox: Although almost all Gypsies will concur with the need to adapt to survive—and indeed will often refer to Romani history as an example of this—others will point to the deep forces of conservatism that have held the Rom together through centuries of hostility, discrimination and oppression. Within this image resides a perception that the gaining of literacy on a group level might well lead to some form of victory, but it will also entail a defeat.

The attempt to engage with the education system as a group poses dilemmas within a framework designed for individuals, both on an institutional and a personal level. It alters the processes by which Gypsy youngsters become included in new communities of practice. Within their concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 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. Whereas Gypsy children may well feel accepted in some situations—though there are many accounts of hostility and discrimination that make that less likely—they are liable to remain as outsiders, as their own cultural worlds are, at best, marginal in the school milieu. And whereas (almost invariably during the primary phases ages 5 to 11) some attempts are made to make references to Romani culture, these are often *tokenistic*, and disconnected from the *real business* of school life, preparation for standard attainment testing. In effect, they are being asked to compartmentalize their social worlds.

Impact of Standard Literacy on Community Membership and Identity

The apprehension to which there was most common allusion concerned possible estrangement from family and group. Indeed, many participants have spoken of themselves as if they were links in a chain. Within such a conception, change cannot be viewed in a neutral light as natural evolution; on the contrary, to move on is to betray the past, and paradoxically, change is likely to be accompanied by a sense of crisis, despite the fact that adaptability is often seen as an essential group trait by Gypsies themselves.

In general, there seemed a rejection of any literacy uses beyond the remit of everyday need, which were viewed as a potentially destabilizing influence on family and communal relationships, and a threat to traditional culture and values, with no obvious payoff. Those who take this path risk social ostracism:

> I don't remember having any books at home as a child, so the only opportunity I had to read was at school. I found it easy and it became my favourite pastime. I do remember, however, some problems being able to read caused: the other travelling children gave me the nickname "Bookie" because I'd much rather read than play. (Ruth, age 30s).

> I used to love those books at school, and one of the teachers, Mrs. K. said I could take them home if I wanted to look at them there. But I never did. Everyone would have thought I was a bit . . . odd. (Daniel, age 19)

A few older participants have confessed, almost as if it were some guilty secret, to a desire to learn how to read. The impression has often been, however,

that whereas the capacity to do so may be life-enhancing for the individual, it threatens one's position as a group member.

In view of the above, it is, perhaps, not surprising if those children who engage most actively, and for the most prolonged periods, with the education system encounter the greatest difficulties reconciling the contrasting worlds of home and school:

> The sister is a young bright girl, the star [of her school]. She was away during SATs [standard attainment tests at ages 7, 11, and 14], which disappointed the school. The family call her gadjified. They don't mind her being at school, but don't want her to bring the school ways home. She doesn't mention it at home. Yes, she compartmentalizes. There are also 2 younger sisters, not as switched on as Ella-Mae. They don't have the same problems. They are not quite as aware. Ella-Mae's asking why can't she go on school trips, why can't she have her friends round. (Liz, fieldworker)

Ella-Mae's strategy to deal with the discontinuities between home and school life, compartmentalization, has been alluded to by several participants. At its most extreme, this is manifested in the school context in the practice of *passing* (concealing any Romani origins). A few youngsters have spoken of hiding evidence of success from some friends and family members at home. Eve (aged 15) commented that, at times, she felt as if she were an actress taking on roles, according to the expectations of family members, friends at home, friends at school, and teachers:

> With some people, I try to pretend that I'm doing OK [at school], but no more. I make out, like, that I'm just staying on till I've finished exams, not because I like it, or I've got mates, or anything. Once, when I was at my Auntie Anna's, and reading out some story from the newspaper, and all my cousins were there, like Dolly and Crystal-Louise, I deliberately got some words wrong, so they didn't think I was all, you know . . . well, a bit like some of the gadje kids. (Eve, age 15)

Of interest here is Eve's selection of the word *gadje*, as distinct from something like *clever*, *show-off*, or *swotty*. The personal risk here is not about displaying some characteristic that might be viewed in a negative light, but of seeming to have gained skills that distance her from other family members and community:

> There are so many reasons why Travellers do not stay on at schools. Their parents got along perfectly well without education; why should they bother? Time at school is often spent trying to fit in, rather than learn. Much work is difficult to grasp, and Traveller children are shocked by the cruelty of the education system. Traveller children are quite mature and independent, and don't like taking orders from somebody they consider to be just a schoolteacher. The authority of one's family will always come first, and fathers often worry about leaving

their children in schools where the other children are hostile and the teachers try to change their children's Romani ways. (Hester, age 17)

It seemed slightly incongruous in some ways for Hester to make the above comment, as she was a student who had stayed on at school long after her peers had left. Hester, subsequently, pointed out that her decision to stay within the education system had led to serious repercussions for her parents, who were somewhat ostracized, and encountered strong criticism from other family and community members.

Indeed, parents have expressed specific concerns about daughters who stay on at school, one fear being that their daughters might become too clever to marry, and their apprehensions are often supported by evidence from those who did stay on:

I know I wouldn't be where I am now without education, but if I had children and they got any treatment like mine, I'd take them out and educate them at home. Whatever you say, it changes you. You can't get educated and just go back to the old ways. Like getting married. I'd have to meet a very special man now, who'd understand. (Sally, age 20s)

My parents didn't want me travelling on my own by train every day and my dad worried that I would be bullied when the other girls found out who I was and where I came from. My mum said they were also concerned I would become ashamed of my family and the culture if I became too educated. . . . I think I should point out . . . that being female has also made a big difference to how my parents saw me and the value of an education. We lived in a very small world and career prospects were never discussed. As a girl, the most my parents wanted for me was to marry well. (Ruth, age 30s)

According to Ruth, it was not merely the case of being educated that created a gulf between the worlds of home and school, but being literate. Daniel (aged 19) said that his father had supported his decision to stay on in education, and at times, seemed quite proud of his son's accomplishments at school, but nevertheless, often became irritated when he came across his son reading at home or writing. Several other participants have been unequivocal in their assessment of the impact of literacy on their lives:

Because I have brothers and sisters who are not literate, they are more able than I am; they have a better quality of life; they are more together; have more security; more direction. Education has divorced me from my community. (Saki, age 30s)

Apart from failing to acquire the life skills that his brothers picked up by not attending school, Saki also noted a comment made by his older brother, that he had "betrayed" all this his family stood for.

Several adult male participants in this study denied that they could read or write, when evidence had already been manifested that they possessed such skills to at least some degree. A number of middle-aged participants (almost invariably female) have expressed interest in attending adult literacy classes. There is sometimes the impression that such learning would need to take place away from the community, for in several cases, participants spoke of their attendance being a secret, even at times, from the closest family members:

> I hide my book in the wardrobe under a pile of clothes. I practice my writin' at home, when there's no-one about. Caleb almost caught me once. I told 'im they were the kids' schoolbooks. (Holly, age 60s)

> There's always hope. Ziggy learnt to read and write, and he was worse than me at school. He learnt in prison, mind. Now there's an idea. (George, age 40s)

Conclusion and Implications

> The vast majority of Traveller pupils linger on the periphery of the education system. The situation has persisted for too long and the alarm bells rung in earlier reports have yet to be heeded. (Ofsted, 2003, p. 6)

For official reports and studies to overlook the wider, social orientations toward literacy is an egregious omission and a barrier to the understanding of the issue, obstructing the formation of strategies that might be adopted within the education system. From a policy perspective, the fixation with full participation in the education system presupposes the desirability of academic attainment and its utility for communities and individuals. More seriously, it overlooks the potential impact on the lives of the individuals concerned and on their membership within their communities. It is clear that within Gypsy groups, standard literacy is viewed with ambivalence. Whereas some parents were keen for their children to have opportunities that were denied to them, there was also a widespread apprehension that literacy skills remove children further from traditional Romani economic and social spheres. In such cases, the compromise position seemed to be for "damage limitation," "a demand for specific skills from schools without immersion in their wider cultures, participation in formal educational processes only on strictly limited terms and for strictly limited purposes" (Lee & Warren, 1991, p. 317).

Of those parents in this study who were positive about literacy, most viewed it as a means through which their children would be empowered in an environment in which economic opportunities were shrinking; they did not perceive any potential social uses. Indeed, the individualistic economic practices perceived as likely outcomes of literacy might be anathema to a

society in which skills are often interchangeable and in which priorities for individual members have traditionally been shaped by wider needs. Moreover, from a social perspective, formal (school-based) literacy was still viewed by many in this study as being potentially divisive, its very use signifying a degree of assimilation. At an extreme end of the spectrum, within this study there persisted a mistrust of the written word itself, a *gadjo* code, both a symbol and potential weapon of an antagonistic external world. For some, there appeared to remain something taboo about the process, tools, and materials of literacy.

Widespread instances of high educational attainment among members of minority communities are likely to be rooted in the home culture, and in wider literacies acquired in that setting, rather than achieved through assimilation to the dominant culture (Pearce, 2006). Traditionally, the assertion of group membership has been of greater importance to Gypsy groups than the acquisition of literacy skills, and indeed, school has often provided a forum for the drawing of boundaries (Andereck, 1992). Many participants concurred with the link between involvement in the education system and assimilation (Okely, 1997), some alluding specifically to the danger posed by the acquisition of literacy, as validated within education policy and school curriculum frameworks.

That both adults and children should feel a need to conceal literacy skills from other group members is indicative of their socially negative value. It would appear that the historical animosity toward literacy (documented by, e.g., Fonseca, 1996; Liegeois, 1987) continues to be a significant factor in orientations toward education. The fact that the written word has been used as a weapon against Gypsy groups, for example, to justify evictions and to place provisos on land use, is one reason for continued suspicion, but wider than this is the perception of literacy as being symbolic of the non-Gypsy world. Only a handful of individuals made any reference to potential intellectual enrichment as an outcome of literacy, and such participants often seemed already somewhat removed from their communities. This, in itself, raises important issues with concepts of *flexible*, *multiple*, and *multifaceted* identities (Bhabha, 1994; Rassool, 1999).

Literacy activities are bound up with the power structures of any society (Rogers, 2001). There is no necessary correlation between formal (school-based) literacy and social or economic empowerment (see, e.g., Aikman, 1999), and in circumstances where this remains the case, there is little incentive for its acquisition. Although it is important to note that both positive and negative attitudes were expressed by participants across the age range in this study, it should be recollected that the structure of cultural capital is provided by meanings and values that are relational rather than intrinsic (Moore, 2004). In a context in which group membership can be inferred through nonadherence to mainstream cultural codes, it would appear that cultural capital is liable to be manifested in the form of an absence of certain elements that constitute the capital of the surrounding society.

It is important to recall that traveling constitutes far more than an act or way of life. It is the expression of a particular identity, and with the impediments to the old traveling patterns (Hawes & Perez, 1995; Levinson & Sparkes, 2004), along with the erosion of Romani languages, the rejection of literacy gains greater salience as a point around which difference can be asserted, a demonstration of a distinct identity (see Gay y Blasco, 1999; Levinson, 2005), only, on this occasion, through *non*performance. In this sense, illiteracy is more than an expression of cultural autonomy or protection against assimilation (Liegeois, 1987; Taylor, 1997), a barrier enabling the avoidance of socialization, identification with "alien culture heroes," as well as preserving Romani languages and discouraging mixed marriages (Dimas, 1975). Illiteracy becomes an ethnic identifier, a badge of honor, and far from a deficiency, it is almost an accomplishment.

Literacy practices are fluid, dynamic, and situated in different domains (Street, 2001); they reflect and shape social structures (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000), or perhaps, in the Romani context, erode them. Considering the conflict between the retention of traditional values and modernism, Street (1995, p. 44) referred to the need for "sensitivity to indigenous cultures and recognition of the dynamic process of their interaction with dominant cultures and societies," suggesting that the reality in such situations is of pragmatic adaptation, "particularly on the part of the less powerful party, to the new skills, conventions and ideologies being introduced." In the long term, this may indeed prove to be the case in Romani communities, but currently, many of those involved continue to perceive the situation as a choice between economic survival and cultural identity. In such a context, the concept of pragmatic adaptation entails significant challenges and dilemmas for educationalists and policy makers, as well as for Gypsies themselves.

Clearly, there is a need for further, in-depth investigation into the uses of literacy within Gypsy communities, and the effects of literacy acquisition at both individual and communal levels. At the same time, there is a need to reassess the construct of literacy as reified in policy texts, and to juxtapose that with cultural conceptions of literacy situated within communities.

There may well be some singularity in the precise circumstances of the Romani situation, as outlined here, but there is also universality. Against a background in which fissures are evident between pedagogical structures/beliefs and actual literacy practices, and in which (nonschool) community-based knowledge has been marginalized, one might speculate as to the alternative literacies that we have all forfeited.

For Romani communities, there may be pragmatic solutions. Noting a current "thirst for education" among young U.S.-based Romanies, Hancock (2002, p. 50) added that it needs to be "accessible . . . attractive . . . compatible with everyday life outside of the classroom, and . . . reassuring to the older generation." For Hancock, education would, ideally, take place in "an all-Romani environment, with trained teachers who are themselves Romanies." Although there can be no disputing the rights afforded to other minority groups, such segregation would constitute a lost opportunity for communities struggling to understand one another.

An alternative and—I believe—more idealistic option would be for a culture change among educational policy makers and within schools. The benefits of a reconception of literacy would operate on institutional and wider social levels and be to the benefit of all pupils, as well as to marginal groups. Such a reconception would challenge the hegemony of the notion of a formal, school-based literacy, allowing for the growth of alternative concepts, such as community and personal literacies (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000). It would allow for a redefinition embracing the wider means and purposes of literacy, allowing for children to go beyond mere technical proficiency, becoming active subjects, as distinct from passive objects of history (Freire & Macedo, 1987). For Gypsy children, specifically, it would provide ferry-ways allowing for movement between ideological and cultural archipelagoes that are currently separated.

Notes

I would like to thank the *AERJ* editors and reviewers for their professionalism and for some extremely helpful suggestions, and also Elizabeth Wood for her generosity with her time and perceptive comments. A central objective of this research is to increase understanding of the social and cultural issues concerning Gypsy children. It is hoped that, at an institutional level, this will stimulate more holistic reflection about education and, ultimately, contribute to a wider discourse amongst policy makers. In the meantime, the intention is to continue further exploration of the field, seeking funding for international collaborative studies involving Roma and other marginal groups.

[1]Liegeois (1986) rejected the terms *Traveller* and *nomad* on the grounds that, by avoiding any ethnic content, such labels deny the existence of a specifically Gypsy culture. In reality, it is difficult to draw boundaries around the group, and Gypsy identities are "complex and multi-layered" (Mayall, 2004, p. 12). As noted by Belton (2005), Gypsy identity is created not only by tradition and heredity but also "by social and ideological factors that give rise to the ethnic narrative of Gypsy identity" (p. 10).

[2]The term *Gypsy* has been used in this article in preference to *Traveller*, the term used, in general, by those working in the field. Both terms have their own connotations. The decision here has been 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*, the terms used for Gypsies as a group, and for individual members of that group. The term *Romani* (or *Romany*) is also sometimes used to designate group members, but is also a more specific descriptor of Gypsy language and culture.

[3]The term for non-Gypsies used in the article—*Gadjo* (singular) *Gadje* (plural)—and used by many participants here as both singular and plural, also found in different spellings elsewhere (e.g., *Gorgio*, *Gauje*, *Gadze*), tends to have pejorative connotations.

[4]To be fair here, it might be recalled that such self-ascription has been made by Gypsy children, to the extent that it has been proposed that those who do not travel cannot be deemed as being Gypsies (Levinson & Sparkes, 2004).

[5]A fuller account of methods used in these studies, and some of the difficulties encountered during the research process, has been provided elsewhere (Levinson, 2004).

[6]The background of participants in these studies varied, most being English Travellers (Romanichals), some others being Scottish Travellers (Nachins) or Irish Travellers (Minceir).

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