

Alternative Education for the Rom

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The Rom* in the United States are nearly 100% illiterate. There are very few in any of the professions. The Rom cannot rely on *gajo* (non-Gypsy) doctors, lawyers, and educators who do not understand their ways or their unique problems.

The Rom face an agonizing dilemma today. Either they will persist as urban nomads, in mobile ghettos, in enclaves of poverty and in prisons, or their cultural traditions will have to evolve to enable them to share in the benefits of this society, to develop a better material and social existence. Education is a basic bridge into contemporary U.S. society and a pioneering effort has been made in Seattle, Washington, to encourage the Rom to step onto that bridge.

The Gypsy Alternative School was originally the brainchild of Ephraim Stevens, a Rom leader in Seattle. The seed of his idea fell upon fertile imaginations and was nourished by funding apportionments from the state, local school levy money, federal and special state money and the Urban, Rural, Racial and Disadvantaged Education Programme. The school was delivered to the Rom in 1973—two portable classrooms, set up in the schoolyard of Bagley Elementary School, a neat brick building on a quiet residential street in Seattle.

There was an immediate reaction in the Bagley School District when parents learned of the existence of the Gypsy Alternative School. The School was presented as a full-blown fact suddenly, without a period of community gestation beforehand. In addition to the fear engendered by the prejudiced view of the Rom, there was also a feeling of resentment at having school territory impinged upon, fear of the disruptive effect the newcomers might have on the Bagley students. At a hastily called PTA meeting, some facts and truths about the Rom, their needs and aspirations, were explained and doubts were allayed, to some extent, about having the Rom in the community.

The *shavora* (children) are taught in a one-room school setting. Facilities of the Bagley School—gymnasium, lunchroom, library and lavatories—are shared by them. The *shavora* who attend the school vary in age from 3 - 16 years of age. School hours are flexible, from about 9:30 am - 4:00-4:30 pm. The students are taught in groups according to their level of achievement, not their ages. Their attendance varies from five to forty students at any given period. The curriculum emphasizes basic skills, particularly reading. Their academic strengths generally lie in mathematics, since they learn to deal with money at an early age.

The *shavora* are highly motivated, responsible and quick to learn. Their teachers reported them to be affectionate, spontaneous and rewarding. They are excited about having an opportunity to learn. When activities are well planned, they are extremely responsible. They have a strong sense of their own self-worth and have distinctive personalities.

One of the main problems of the Gypsy Alternative School has been the long traditional distrust of *gajo* institutions. Parents are afraid of “losing” their children to *gajo* society. Also, their ability to survive for centuries without benefit of formal education is a source of pride to them and an obstacle to their acceptance of schooling. There is a strong tradition among the Rom to “never aspire to be more than your father was,” according to one Rom leader who can neither read nor write, that prohibits seeking education. Their own illiteracy makes it very difficult for Romany parents to deal with school authorities and paperwork. Their lack of birth certificates (most Rom are delivered at home by midwives who do not register births) makes enrollment problematical.

The relationship between Romany parents and their children is extremely close and protective. Separation anxiety is extreme among the *shavora* of all ages and necessitated at the Gypsy Alternative School the installation of a telephone in the classroom so that the children could call their parents during the day.

Many gymnastic and physical activities common to *gajo* are not allowed by over-protective Romany parents. In spite of deep apprehension, however, basketball has become popular among the *shavora*. In general, they do not own such things as balls, bicycles or toys of any kind.

Romany parents visit the school continuously to discuss all manner of problems with the teachers, and they telephone them at all hours, even on week-ends. Formal Parent-Teacher Association meetings or

note-taking arouse suspicion and discourage cooperation among the parents, so meetings are generally spontaneous, informal and private.

An inevitable problem encountered by the Gypsy Alternative School is that of regular attendance and continuous enrollment. The Rom leave Seattle for a week or more to attend a wedding elsewhere, or a funeral, or simply to travel around the country. The girls often leave in early adolescence to marry. Although enrollment fluctuates, attendance is fairly regular when the pupils are in town.

Free busing was offered to the *shavora* to encourage their attendance but, according to the Area Administrator of Special Projects at the time, "The kids were afraid to ride the bus, even though they were the only children on it." In order to encourage parents to bring the children to school themselves, the transportation cost (about \$1.50 a day) was given directly to the parents. As a result, the parents brought them in their cars and pick-up trucks and were primarily interested in collecting the money. But the money seemed to be spent on the children. They started turning up with new clothes and shoes. Attendance rose markedly. Most encouraging was that after the reimbursement scheme was discontinued a few years later, attendance remained nearly at the same level. The overall-rate of attendance in 1978 was forty-seven percent. "That may be the worst in the city," the Area Administrator observed, "but it is the best ever experienced by the Gypsies."

Another challenge presented by the Romany culture is that of language. Younger children, especially, do not speak English fluently, though after it is learned, they are generally articulate. A Rom teacher's aide and cultural liaison acts as interpreter of Romanes in the classroom.

Other inherent problems are generated by Romany traditions and beliefs, which are different from American ones, based as they are on ancient Hindu customs. Teachers had to learn about *marime* (impurity) concepts that apply to taboo subjects or practices, such as female or sexual matters, and bodily functions. The *shavora* are also reluctant to eat from plates or utensils used by *gaje* and they do not eat certain foods. During periods of mourning, they do not work or play with colors, paints or balls. Beliefs in nature spirits, and spirits of the dead who may do harm to the living survive within the Romany culture.

Contrary to common stereotypes, the Rom abide by a rigid code of morality and cleanliness, based on *marime* observances. Teen-age sexual promiscuity among the Rom is rare and has traditionally been

avoided by early marriages. Bride-prices are paid and the new bride lives with her husband's family. Traditionally, girls marry at about twelve and boys around fifteen years of age.

Access to education, although only elementary at the Gypsy Alternative School, has already changed their views toward early marriage. A striking fact was that two girls of sixteen and seventeen years of age were still unmarried, attending the school and serving as teacher's aides. The school experience had given them a new self-awareness, a broader scope of ambition and a view toward alternative occupational possibilities outside the restricted trades of fortune-telling, furniture crafting, car dealing and related metal working.

The *shavora* singled out *gajo* friends on the basis of their "toughness," attractiveness, maturity and morality. The *shavora* were all shocked when a *gajo* who had been a particular friend was caught smoking marijuana—a practice generally abhorred by them. Significantly, the *shavora* reportedly did not reinforce their parents' prejudices against *gaje* by telling them about the incident.

Raising of health standards is a bonus of the school. With early marriages, teen-age pregnancies are frequent, with their of maternal-child illnesses and fatalities. Babies are delivered by midwives who have little or no training in hygiene or medicine. This is in accordance with *marime* beliefs, which forbid women to seek male gynecologists or obstetricians. It is hoped that future training of midwives in paraprofessional medical centers will become possible. For the time being, at school the *shavora* and their parents are taught about hygiene, health and preventive medicine, though sex education is a sensitive area. Children in the school receive free breakfasts and lunches. They also share in the medical services of Bagley School, where they are vaccinated against common diseases, unlike the majority of *shavora* who do not attend public schools. Initially, parents greatly feared these vaccinations, believing that their children would be infected with the diseases instead of protected against them. But finally, the parents themselves began to request the injections. The children also receive dental, hearing and eye examinations—many for the first time in their lives.

At this point in history, that the Rom have consented to send their children to a school within the *gajo* public school system is an unprecedented breakthrough. However, the idea that the school should serve not as an ultimate end but as a bridge into the larger society, is not yet fully accepted. The exclusive character of the Gypsy Alternative School is an important factor in its success. The cultural liaison and teacher's aide at the school reflected optimism:

This is something worthwhile for the Gypsy community. We want an education for the children. We know you can't get jobs without knowing how to read and write. I'm so proud of my kids. Who knows, in five or ten years, they might go on to high school . . . or even college!

But there is also a feeling of persistent distrust, and ambivalence about entering the larger society, as expressed by a parent:

We want to be part of the community in some ways. This school is our chance. We're starting to think about occupations other than the old ones. But we should still teach our own culture. The kids should learn how to read and write Romany.

The *shavora* remain separate from the regular student population at Bagley—using the lunchroom, gym, library and lavatories at different times. Desegregation rulings are not applied to the school, since it is a special “bilingual program.” The Office of Civil Rights has exempted the school as a unique program that involves relatively few people. The Office is obviously more concerned with the problems of blacks, Asians, Indians and Eskimos, that involve larger populations. Both Rom and *gajo* are grateful for this *modus vivendi*. One *shav*'s mother explained,

Kids used to be scared to go to school. The *gaje* would make fun of us because we couldn't read or write. When you have your own school, though, you don't feel left out.

The most likely aegis for education to *shavora* seems to be such a bilingual program, as it exists in the Seattle Gypsy Alternative School. However, the flexibility that made the Seattle school a success appears to be difficult in other areas of the country. The thrust of national public school programs, such as the Bilingual Program, is integration of non-English speaking children into the school system. To request separate facilities for Rom children would be segregationist and would expose public schools to immediate heavy criticism. In addition, the possibility of establishing a bilingual program for the Rom is generally negated if two primary requisites are enforced: (1) that the *shavora* do not speak English as, for example, children of newly arrived Hispanic parents do not; and (2) that at least twenty children be identified for placement in separate classrooms according to their ages. Once in such a program, the *shavora* would be entitled to a Romany teacher's aide, to assist an ESL teacher. All other classes would be shared with *gaje* children.

These requirements for establishing a bilingual program generally militate against the Rom for the following reasons: (1) The *shavora*,

though; they speak Romanes and may have some difficulties with English, usually speak English too well to qualify; and (2) To separate families into different age groups and place them in different classrooms—or different schools, in the case of age groups 5-10, 11-13 and 14-17—is an unacceptable prospect, given the close protectiveness of Rom brothers and sisters and their fear of *gajo* society. A six-year old expressed this unreasoning dread, nervously waving his small fist and exclaiming, “I’d bring a big stick to school . . . and if anybody picked on me, I’d let ‘em have it!”

The fear of ridicule of an older *shav* who enters, say sixth grade and is totally illiterate, makes enrollment at that age nearly unthinkable. A twelve-year old girl, who may soon be married, or a boy of fifteen who already earns his own living and is a street-wise person, would find it degrading, to say the least, to submit to jibes about reading ability. Add to these attitudes parental fear of “abandoning” their children to *gajo* institutions, and you have a cultural barrier that is almost insurmountable.

In the Seattle Gypsy Alternative School, however, the *shavora* are secure in their own school room. The initial fear, mistrust and hostility between *shavora* and *gajo* have given way to a mutual rapprochement. Though physical fights are rare, racial slurs and insults are tossed out from time to time. But the *shavora* have learned to assert themselves in *gajo* circles and even dared to complain to the Principal of Bagley School about such things as having equal gym time. The fact is that peer interaction between *shavora* and *gajo*, in spite of segregated facilities, has developed as an inevitable consequence of the location of the Gypsy Alternative School in the Bagley School yard.

Attempts have been made to set up other alternative schools for Gypsies in cities such as Tacoma and Chicago, but they did not meet with success. The Seattle School’s achievements result from the “loose approach,” the absence of preconceived ideas on the part of the teachers about how the Rom should behave, and the willingness of the teachers to learn from, as well as to teach, the children. The flexibility in funding allocations and in administering those funds in sometimes unorthodox ways that meet unique needs has kept the school going. Patience, also, has been an important element in dealing with the Rom. One teacher smiled wryly when she commented: “They are fascinating people. Exhausting sometimes, but always fascinating! They have nothing . . . so they can demand everything!”

*“Gypsy” in Romanes, the universal Gypsy language, which is based on a Sanskrit dialect, and which has established their origins in northwest India. Romanes is heavily overlaid with words borrowed from other countries of the western hemisphere through which they passed on their migrations during the last 1,000 years.

Critique

“Alternative Education for the Rom” concerns a little written about ethnic group, the Gypsy, and concentrates on the dilemma of cultural resistance on the part of the Rom and cultural change for their survival in the U.S. Leita Kaldi discusses an educational alternative the Rom in Seattle, Washington find acceptable to bridge the gap between traditional Rom culture and the U.S. social structure.

What makes this paper unique and important for ethnic scholars is Kaldi’s view of cultural resistance and change as an ongoing process. The Rom, unlike most ethnic groups residing in the U.S., have refused U.S. institutional, governmental, and social support. Gypsies are attempting to continue their traditional lifestyle in the midst of and in spite of an everchanging social fabric. However, it is apparent from Kaldi’s work that Rom survival as a culturally resistant group is questionable. A solution to this problem, Kaldi believes, is in the educational alternative which is apparently succeeding in Seattle, Washington.

The account of this educational alternative is fascinating as Kaldi points out the push-pull effects of cultural change and cultural resistance for the Rom adults and non-Gypsy teaching staff. New viewpoints and broader perspectives meet with initial skepticism in the Rom community. Rom adults are beginning to think about the long-term advantages of this Seattle elementary school for their children; however, the Rom community insists that Rom traditions and language must continue. Kaldi illustrates that cultural traditions flow between the Rom community and the school as a dual process. The school, non-Gypsy teachers, and Gypsy children are learning Rom traditions as a result of the cultural exchanges. A cultural bridge is formed.