Chapter 6

The Sikavni – Open Access Partnership: An Alternative or Mainstream School?

INTRODUCTION

Chapters 6 to 9 present the main findings of the research which resulted from the study. In accord with the foci of the research questions, themes covered in these four chapters are the place of the *Sikavni* in mainstream society, the history and development of the *Sikavni*, its characteristics as an organisation, quality and effectiveness and its role in the provision of alternative education to a group of Romani children in Australia.

One of the research questions that guided the course of this study focuses on alternative educational options available in Australia and in international schooling systems for people of ethnic or cultural minority. If these alternatives are appropriate for the educational needs and aspirations of the Romani people, the question must be asked are they also sustainable? Underpinning this discussion therefore is consideration of the schooling options available in Australia, that is, mainstream (government and non-government) and alternative schools. To accomplish this task, the chapter opens by exploring the concept of a school. It presents the criteria for registration of mainstream non-government schools followed by examination of alternative education. This

discourse sets the scene for examination of the place of the *Sikavni* in mainstream society and the education system in Australia. It concludes with a discussion of the applicability and likelihood of success of alternative education and schooling discussed here for the Romani people in Australia.

CONCEPTS OF A 'SCHOOL'

Each State and Territory has its own legislation governing the provision of public education and although this situation makes generalisation more difficult, Australian legislation in all states has the same underlying principle. That is, it guarantees and requires that all Australian children access a broad and general education through a range of educational programs in government schools. It is also compulsory for all students to attend school for a specified period. A 'Government school' is clearly defined as a school established by each state and territory government under the provisions of the relevant Education Act for the purpose of providing courses of instruction in pre-school, primary or secondary education.

The Education Act 1972 (South Australia) defines a school as 'any Government or non-government school' which could be said to not be particularly defining, however, it goes on to define a non-government school as 'any school or institution (not being a Government school) at which any person or body of persons provides, or offers to provide, courses of instruction in primary or secondary education'. Other states vary in the extent of their definition of a school and New South Wales provides no definition at all.

It is important to note here that the school being proposed by the Romani community was a non-government school as opposed to an 'Ethnic School'. According to the Ethnic Schools Association of South Australia (n.d. para 4), the defining factor of an ethnic school's identity is that it must be an after-hours language and culture school and this component of the definition did not fit with the proposed school. Other components of the definition however, fit the proposal well and these included:

> must be non-profit making ... open to all students irrespective of their linguistic background ... work to sustain and develop the languages and cultures of Australian communities ... provide a focus for their communities and foster a sense of identity among Australians of all cultural backgrounds ... promote cohesion within the diversity of multicultural society.
>
> (Ethnic Schools Association of SA n.d.: para 5)

During the 1870s and 1880s, Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand and the United States introduced legislation making elementary education free and compulsory. This was arguably the defining era in educational history and heralded modern arguments about de-schooling, free schooling and alternative schooling (Middleton 1982: 1).

Over the last twenty-five years, the percentage, but not the number, of Catholic non-government schools has fallen due in part, to the significant rise in the number of small, independent schools operated by religious groups. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (cited in Grimshaw 2002: 80) tells us that the most significant growth period for non-government schools was between 1977 and 1985 when the total number of small schools (non-Catholic schools and non-Anglican schools) doubled from 341 to 692. The philosophical or religious basis of these schools includes: Anglican; Baptist; Catholic; Christadelphian; Christian (non-denominational); Coptic Orthodox; Expatriate; Greek

Orthodox; Independent (non-religious); Jewish; Lutheran; Montessori; Muslim; Pentecostal; Presbyterian; Seventh Day Adventist; Steiner; Unaffiliated (unknown); and Uniting Church (Grimshaw 2002: 34).

In 1986, the then Federal Labor Government introduced a more regulated 'New Schools Policy' that required non-government school proposals to demonstrate that the new school would not impact adversely on existing schools. This requirement protected the already existing schools and limited non-government school development to areas of demographic growth by restricting the number of new schools established and their enrolments (Marginson 1996: 113 cited in Grimshaw 2002: 80). It was believed that this would allow public funding to be used more efficiently across schools in both the government and non-government sectors, facilitated by impositions on funding. In 1996, the Conservative Coalition Government abolished this 'New Schools Policy'. Commonwealth controls on the establishment of new non-government schools and the expansion of existing schools were lifted, including the funding restrictions (Harrington & Winter 2002: para 4).

Since January, 1997, new non-government schools have not been required to go through the New Schools Policy process in order to receive Commonwealth funding. Provided they meet State or Territory registration requirements they automatically receive funding from the Commonwealth (Grimshaw 2002: 80).

Australia now has one of the largest non-government school sectors in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), due in the most part to the

Catholic parish schools. In 2000, there were 589 catholic schools in NSW alone. It is believed that one of the reasons for the consistent and significant contribution of religious schools is that in the early days of colonial New South Wales, the British Government made no provision for schooling in Australia since it was deemed to be the responsibility of the churches (Ryan and Sungaila 1995: 153).

In a paper published by the National Council of Independent Schools' Association in 2002 addressing several issues in relation to Commonwealth funding of non-government schools, the importance of choice in schooling in a multicultural, democratic society is encapsulated. In fact, it is the diversity of the non-government school sector that gives strength to society's ideal of being truly pluralistic. The overall effect is to allow cultural groups 'to express their unique character in schools and education programs', but at the same time, enforcing the promotion of set goals, the same as those pursued by public schools. Most importantly, the diversity of the sector gives it strength:

> While Australians respect the right of the individual, as a nation we are also concerned with social unity. There is a difference, however, between social unity that is achieved through diversity and that which is imposed by uniformity.
>
> ... Choice in schooling is vital if we are to freely express the philosophical, cultural and religious diversity that enriches our society and underpins our democratic way of life.
>
> (National Council of Independent Schools' Association 2002: 4)

Therefore, provided of course, that non-government schools stay within specified, mainstream boundaries, contributing to – not working against – society, being mindful

of Australia's pluralistic society, then they assist society to live harmoniously despite its individual differences.

REGULATION OF NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS – FOCUS ON SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Each State and Territory in Australia has its own internal system for regulating the non-government education sector, but every system achieves this through the registration of non-government schools. It is interesting to note that many non-government schools are not 'alternative' in terms of their structure, principles and philosophies and they subscribe to similar values as mainstream public schools. Many however, have a religious affiliation.

The *Sikavni* is situated in South Australia, hence the focus on this state. The initial aim was for the *Sikavni* to become a registered non-government school. The process of which is controlled by the Non-Government Schools Secretariat. This body carries the overall responsibility of initial registration and ongoing regulation of non-government schools. The Secretariat describes itself as an advisory and administrative unit attached to the Office of the Minister for Education and Children's Services. Members of the Secretariat have responsibilities that relate to the planning, registration and funding of non-government schools and to the funding and support of ethnic schools (Wadrop 1999: 1). Within the Secretariat lies the Non-Government Schools Registration Board (Registration Board) and the Planning Committee for Non-Government Schools (Planning Committee).

The South Australian Non-government Schools Secretariat

The information below is quoted from the South Australian Non-Government Schools Secretariat website and the same information is given in a pamphlet to all enquirers about submitting a proposal for establishment of a non-government school (Wadrop 1999). The Registration Board describes itself as a statutory body with powers and functions defined in the Education Act 1972 (SA) V:

> The functions of the Board are to:
> - assess applications for State registration in accordance with the criteria for the establishment/registration of new or changing non-government schools, as set down in the Act;
> - review the registration of every non-government school at least once every five years during the period of registration of the school;
> - assess applications from non-government schools proposing to enrol full fee paying overseas students; and
> - report to Parliament on an annual basis.
>
> (Wadrop 1999: 3)

The Planning Committee, established in 1997, is an advisory committee to the South Australian Minister for Education and Children's Services and ensures that if any proposal for a new non-government school seeks State funding, it is subjected to the provisions of the planning policy. The Committee's principal functions are to:

> - consider proposals to develop new or significantly changed non-government schools for which State funding is sought, through a clearly-defined application process. The Planning Committee considers each application in terms of planning and related criteria determined by the Minister for Education and Children's Services and set down in the Non-government Schools Planning Policy;
> - serve as a forum for the consideration of cross-sector schools planning issues in South Australia; and
> - advise the Minister for Education and Children's Services on such matters related to the planning of primary and secondary schooling in South Australia as the Minister may determine.
>
> (Wadrop 1999: 5)

These bodies are jointly responsible for the registration process for non-government schools.

Proposal to Establish a New/Significantly Changed Non-Government School

In order to lodge a school proposal, standard procedures stipulate information required to demonstrate that the criteria set out in the Education Act 1972 (SA) had been met by the school administration:

> Instruction is satisfactory in nature and content: including the eight areas of learning nationally agreed by the Australian Education Council - English, science, mathematics, technology, studies of society & environment (including religious studies), languages other than English, the arts and health (incorporating physical education and personal development).
>
> There is adequate protection for the safety, health and welfare of students: fire safety, safety of electrical installations and appliances, playground equipment of a fixed nature, storage and handling of inflammable, noxious or hazardous substances and general matters of a health safety and welfare nature as they affect both students and staff. Including inspections and reports by the SA Metropolitan Fire Service, the local Board of Health, a licensed electrical contractor (for existing premises) and persons expert in the construction and maintenance of playground equipment where applicable. Plans of premises must be submitted, together with evidence that both the site and the building comply with planning and zoning requirements and any orders imposed by local government or other authorities.
>
> Sufficient financial resources are/will be continuously available to ensure continued provision of the first two criteria: projected draft cash flow budget covering at least five years of operation.
>
> (Education Act 1972 (SA) s. 72 g (3)

Applying the South Australian Education Act 1972 (SA) demonstrates that the *Sikavni* in its current form cannot be defined as a school because it does not provide courses of instruction in primary or secondary education. Education in the mainstream curriculum is provided by the Open Access College whereas the role of the *Sikavni* is to provide the same services as a parent or guardian in a culturally sensitive environment.

Concurrently, it provides the opportunity for children to participate in culturally appropriate activities such as guitar playing, dancing, circus acrobatics, fortune telling and even magic.

Financial assistance is available through the state or territory government and new schools are also encouraged to submit an application for Commonwealth funding. It was apparently the issue of government money being used to fund a Romani school that started the path-altering chain of events discussed in Chapter 7. One of the other factors against the *Sikavni* becoming a registered non-government school would always be that student names and addresses would need to be given during census taking (Pender, Interview Q3, 24 September, 1999).

As the arrangement with the Open Access College currently stands, the parent's desire for anonymity has been catered for by utilising the address of the *Sikavni* as the home address for all children. The *Sikavni* has this information but is not required to release it and furthermore, all correspondence with the Open Access College is through the school, rather than the parents who are happy with this arrangement.

The South Australian definition of a school is vital to the operation of the *Sikavni* for the reason that under the Education Act 1972 (SA), enrolling students or allowing them to receive instruction at an unregistered non-government school is an offence. This means that allowing children who are not formally enrolled with the Open Access College to attend the *Sikavni* during school hours is an offence under this provision. Therefore with

regard to children not formally enrolled in any mainstream school, the *Sikavni* has the following policy:

> Children who are not formally enrolled with the Open Access College are welcome to attend the *Sikavni* in out-of-school hours during term times and all day during the public school holidays.
>
> (Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language 2000: 1)

The *Sikavni* takes no holidays unless too many of the supervisors are absent. The *Sikavni* also has a policy of never preventing a child from becoming literate – and helping them to become educated wherever possible. There have been occasions when the two policies have clashed, leading to negotiations with parents. On one occasion, this resulted in new children enrolling in the Open Access College and on others, it resulted in total loss of the children from the *Sikavni*.

By defining what can and cannot be considered a school through the application of a set of rules governing its existence and by stating that without government approval a school cannot exist, the government puts itself in a position of being required to provide an appropriate system of schooling for all children, not just those who fit into the confines of the mainstream, mass education schools provide today.

THE POWER OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Some but not all non-government schools offer education described as 'alternative'. In Australia, the two most popular alternative systems are Steiner and Montessori, but there are also other types of alternative schools such as 'schools without walls' and some of these are considered in this chapter.

There are many different views and ways of expressing alternative education. One of the more concrete guidelines (as versus philosophical beliefs) is that of the Iowa Association of Alternative Education Constitution (n.d.) which provides the following definitions. Perhaps the most important factor in choosing these definitions over others is that they are in current use:

> **Regular School:** an established environment designed to provide a comprehensive education to the general populace to which assignment of students is made more on the basis of geographical location than unique education need.
>
> **Alternative Education**: the study or practice of implementing alternative schools or programs. Public alternative education serves to ensure that every young person may find a path to the educational goals of the community. Alternative schools and programs focus on what they can offer the student, not on what problems the student has had in the past. Alternative education is a vital component of the total educational system.
>
> **Alternative School**: an established environment apart from the regular school. With policies and rules, educational objectives, staff and resources designed to accommodate student needs, an alternative school provides a comprehensive education consistent with the goals established by the school district. Students attend via choice.
>
> **Alternative Program**: an established class or environment within or apart from the regular school. An alternative program is designed to accommodate specific student educational needs such as work-related training, reading, mathematics, science, communication, social skills, physical skills, employability skills, study skills, or life skills.
>
> (Iowa Association of Alternative Education Constitution n.d.: Article 2)

In comparison with this view and notwithstanding that current thinking and practice dictate that alternative education is provided in alternative schools, Morley (1991: 1) defines alternative education as a perspective that should not be considered as either a simple procedure or an isolated program. He asserts that the philosophy of alternative education is based upon the belief that not only can all people be educated, but there are

also many ways in which they can be educated, including the need for different environments.

The characteristics that distinguish alternative schools from their conventional counterparts are described by Young (1990: 2-3) as:

- A greater responsiveness to a perceived educational need within the community;
- A more focussed instructional program, usually featuring a particular curricular emphasis, instructional method, or school climate;
- A shared sense of purpose. Common goals and a defined educational philosophy are held by students and staff;
- A more student-centred philosophy. Emphasis is on the whole student. Affective as well as cognitive needs are met;
- A non-competitive environment. Students are not pitted against one another for grades and recognition. Student progress is measured in terms of self-improvement;
- A greater autonomy. Principals, teachers and students have greater freedom from the central administration than their counterparts in traditional schools;
- A smaller school and a more personalised relationship between students and staff.

Goodlad et al (1975: 2) believe that for alternative education philosophies to have a broader impact they must become more institutionalised and once this has happened, that which is alternative today often becomes the conventional of tomorrow. Most importantly, current convention dictates that the outcomes from alternative education should match those of public education. Therefore, although the process of education may change and the environment may differ between schools, there must still be a school (even if it is a home school) and the end product – the graduate – must be a contributing member of society.

The question of whether society needs to have an alternative to mainstream education is one that is often used to stimulate debate. There are many who believe that the ills of society are a reflection of the quality of education our children receive in modern schools. This view is reflected in the quote below by Perkinson (1976: 110). It is important to note there is no qualification of whether the author is referring to non-government or public schools or both:

> Our education, like other institutions and formulations of the present age is poor. It has no breadth. It speaks in a dialect. As we construe it, education refers to a narrow circle of experiences, powers, and literature of its own. Education should be as broad as man and demonstrating whatever elements are in him ... Today's education does none of this. We confront the vanity of our education when we look at its result: society.

Society has traditionally expected one type of education, school and pedagogy to suit every child. It takes no account of the fact that in society the way in which individuals learn will be affected by their cultural heritage:

> We all speak out of a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as 'ethnic artists' or film-makers. We are all, in that sense, *ethnically* located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are.
>
> (Hall in Donald & Rattansi 1992: 258)

We have, in Australia, a clear set of guidelines, rules by which to design curricula and subject matter. Controlled diversity in which to be different is 'normal' in that we do not expect that every person will look, think or act the same as we do can only benefit society – resulting (hopefully) in a society in which 'mainstream' is 'alternative' and there is no 'minority'.

Because it is mandated that all children must attend school until a certain, arbitrary age, those who leave early have no safe (or legal) place to go. The drop-out rate, according to Illich (1971: 69), 'points to a grass-roots demand for a completely fresh look'. But what would children know? How was the leaving age chosen? Modern society sees a child of thirteen and dictates that in order for this child to be successful in life, he or she must be in school. But the question of whether this is infringing the rights of those young adults not successful in schools by forcing them to remain for a longer time in a place that holds little value sits heavily. There are also those who believe that compulsory school attendance may actually infringe on a child's right to education:

> The compulsory school attendance law ... functions as an infringement on the child's fundamental rights, and can even infringe the right to education. For this reason, there is a severe duty on the State to prove that its compulsory school attendance law is reasonable and justifiable.
>
> In practice, there is only one way in which the State can achieve this – it must show that the education that a child will receive in a school is so desirable that it justifies the sacrifice of so many of the child's fundamental rights. If the State cannot do this for every child affected by the law, it can protect its attendance law only by providing alternative options for those who prefer to receive their education in places other than a school.
>
> (van Oostrum 2001: para 23)

The Romani community (and no doubt other non-Western cultures) sees not a thirteen year old child, but rather, a young adult who should be taking their place in adult society. The lack of the modern concept of childhood is evident in many non-Western cultures (including Romani culture) and care must be taken when diagnosing a situation from a different cultural sphere (Reagan 2000: 171). For example, an outsider looking in may see a male child throwing a tantrum. To the outsider, he is a child with a discipline problem and if this child is to succeed in life, his behaviour must be seen as 'aberrant' and a 'problem' needing to be 'fixed'. To an insider, he is more likely to be

viewed as a baby adult measuring and defining his boundaries and would be dealt with in this manner. Therefore even the ethnic view of childhood and its requirements may be different from that of a Western community. Because Western society has decided that it is necessary that children be allowed to play and go to school rather than assume a useful position in society, does not mean that it is the only, or even the right view.

The statement below made by Illich (1971) appears to narrowly assume that class and poverty are the only defining reasons for a child to fail in school, and appears not to take into account that there may be other (cultural) factors, including that not all children will learn the same way. Nevertheless, Illich provides us with further evidence, should it be needed, that mainstream schools cannot be all things to all people:

> It should be obvious that even with schools of equal quality a poor child can seldom catch up with a rich one. Even if they attend equal schools and begin at the same age, poor children lack most of the educational opportunities which are casually available to the middle-class child. These advantages range from conversation and books in the home to vacation travel and a different view of oneself, and apply, for the child who enjoys them, both in and out of school. So the poorer student will generally fall behind so long as he depends on school for advancement or learning. The poor need funds to enable them to learn, not to get certified for the treatment of their alleged disproportionate deficiencies.
>
> (Illich 1971: 14)

There appears to be no supporting evidence for this assertion. However, Illich uses his entire manuscript as his argument to support this belief. The issues of poverty and class are already addressed in Chapter 2 but the underpinnings of this assertion could also be applied to children of ethnic minorities as demonstrated by many of the cases highlighted in this study.

THE ARGUMENT IN FAVOUR OF WORKING WITH MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

The argument in favour of mainstream schooling is that all children can be catered for in mainstream Australian schools requiring only the fine tuning of the current environment. This would negate the need to set up a complete and separate system of schooling. In Australia as in other nations, there is a tendency to see the children whose needs are not being catered for in conventional learning settings as the problem:

> Practitioners tell us this group of young people is growing. Frequently the local response to students with challenging behaviours, learning difficulties, who 'don't fit' traditional schooling and may be at risk of leaving has been to transfer them to alternative settings, community schools and teaching units.
>
> (Spierings 2003: 2)

As explored in Chapters 2 and 3, this phenomenon is causing considerable concern and facilitating the abuse of the rights of children. One of the main issues in both Central and Eastern Europe is that these 'problem' children are being shunted into poorly resourced institutions and left to vegetate. Spierings' argument continues that the answer does not lie in alternative schools as these institutions are not capable of providing education of an acceptable standard which could disadvantage the children in the long term:

> A distinguishing feature very often of these settings is an attempt to develop a stronger connection with practical skills related to the world of work.
> However these alternatives are chronically under recognised, under funded, precariously placed in the structure of education administration and generally considered marginal or outcast to mainstream schooling. As a result they are limited in terms of what can be achieved, evaluated and transferred to 'traditional' schooling.
>
> (Spierings 2003: 2)

Should the characteristics of these alternative schools be incorporated into mainstream schools, then the issues of funding, marginalisation and quality would be negated. There appears to be a growing appreciation of this issue and several initiatives have been undertaken in Australia. One of these is the Brisbane Distance Education School; this school caters for children from Kindergarten to Year 12. This is a government school providing education to the circus children of Queensland. A large part of the strategy that has made this school so successful is that it is mobile and can follow the children on their show circuit. Initially following only the coastal route, it now it has expanded and encompasses the western Queensland route as well:

> ...the Brisbane School of Distance Education teachers spend part of the working year following both the circuits with face-to-face teaching of the show children in a local classroom or community hall. When the teachers return to Brisbane, the children continue their education by way of written papers, with the assistance of a parent, in most instances the mother, and sometimes with the aid of a home tutor employed by the parents. Also, on the occasions that the teachers are in Brisbane and not on the circuits, the children sometimes attend the local school under the supervision of a local teacher or a casual teacher (who 'relieves' or supplements the duties of the local teacher when the latter has too many local students to accommodate the new arrivals).
>
> (Danaher 1998: 1)

Danaher (1998: 2) describes this school and the features and issues that affect the education of these itinerant children. Using the expertise of researchers from a number of fields, the description of the school draws on the fields of educational psychology, psychology and sociology and post-modern theories of marginalisation and resistance (Danaher 1998: 3). Although these children are not of the same cultural heritage as the Roma, this book has many initiatives for the education and schooling of a peripatetic group.

An important difference is that the teachers from the Queensland Distance Education School are able to follow these children for some time each year because show people travel together as a cohesive group. This phenomenon does not often occur amongst Roma in Australia and this prevents the ability to directly utilise the same strategies, however, the depth of the analysis enables cross-correlation in many areas. Additionally there has been consultation and with English traveller groups who share many of the same educational issues as the Roma in Australia.

Another alternative mainstream school is 'Access Yea Community Education', an alternative education program that enables young adults to complete education from year six to year twelve entirely outside mainstream schools if that is their wish.[1]

The City Centre in Melbourne gives students a week-long insight into an alternative education school. This 'school without walls' was developed in response to the Middle Years Research and Development Project (MYRAD) that was commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education & Training (1999 – 2001). The project was focused primarily on the middle years of schooling (years 5 to 9) and found 'a strong pattern of under-achievement, and disengagement from school, particularly for boys' (Centre for Applied Educational Research 2002).[2] The City Centre currently only caters for Year 8 and 9 students enrolled in public schools in Victoria.

These examples show that there is increased public and government awareness of the need for not only more culturally-sensitive and multicultural education but also changes

[1] Information on this program can be found at http: //www.home-ed.vic.edu.au/Resources/ayce.htm
[2] Information on this program can be found at http: //www.educationfoundation.org.au

on a broad scale in mainstream education and its institutions. They also demonstrate that although it is often a tendency of human nature to throw away anything does not work exactly as wanted; a better alternative may be to improve the resources we already possess. Another and perhaps one of the most prominent reasons in favour of promoting mainstream schools is support of the widely held belief that in order to succeed in mainstream society, a solid education in a school espousing mainstream values is required:

> The transmission of such a wide range of languages, religions, morals, customs and national values common to mainstream Australian society, as well as knowledge and skills, is only possible through the extensive network of schools, colleges, and universities. Educational organisations are designed to foster a broad range of socially valued abilities, mainly cognitive ones, but affective and motor abilities as well. Because this socialisation of young people is thought to be of greater benefit to society than to the individual, education can be seen as one of the most efficient methods of social control.
>
> (Foster cited in Morrow 1998: 77)

Macedo (2000: 23) argues that public education reform could avoid arguments about the promotion of civic values by removing them from the curriculum, but the pedagogical impact of this is difficult to picture. The substantial changes in approach required would allow for greater scope for parental choice in school selection and greater perceived respect of pluralism and the integrity of the family. The greatest benefit to families would be the resulting increase in parental control over their children's education, effectively solving the dilemma of alternative schools by negating the need for them. In public schools, children are exposed to a variety of alternatives and allowed to choose for themselves. Macedo (2000: 236) uses the example of the Amish child who wants to make something of their life, to become 'an astronaut or pianist'. By removing this child

from the school, the parents are denying them this right and may be condemning the child to a life that is 'stunted and deformed'.

Notwithstanding the positive aspects of greater parental control, alternative schools could mean a loss of government control over the curriculum and schooling. Just because a school is 'alternative' does not imply that it is better as this interview with Marcia shows. The school in question offered an alternative approach to education through its philosophical approach to learning:

> When my daughter turned five, my sister and I decided to send them to a local alternative school [Name Deleted]. Before we enrolled them, we went to see the school and it looked ok, the kids who were already there seemed happy. The craft program looked good when we went all the kids were doing good artwork.
>
> Their curriculum was being printed so I couldn't see it the day I asked, but they said it would be back soon. There wasn't really anything else they could show me so that I could see what the kids would learn at the school.
>
> The first week went okay as the kids settled in. They were scared but they were excited too. It was a big deal to be going to school at last. At the end of the first week, I asked again to see the school's curriculum – you know, what they actually teach the kids, but they still couldn't show me.
>
> Then the kids started to have problems, you know, like they were separated and couldn't do the same activities, girls were supposed to play with girls and boys with boys. My brother's son was separated from my daughter and he started to get panicky. My youngest son was in the kindergarten class and he wasn't allowed to play with either of the others. It all got out of control and after three weeks, I didn't want my kids to go any more. We took them away.
>
> (Marcia, Interview Q26, 6 October 2001)

In the current climate of 'multiculturalism' (a form of cultural pluralism) there is an often uneasy balance between tolerance and prejudice and the presence of many small schools could destabilise the system resulting in a form of structural pluralism.

Marginson (quoted in Hannon 1996: 3) believes that isolating cultures could lead to 'little monocultures standing side by side, essentially hostile and not understanding each other, rather than mixing with kids together in common schools'. This seems especially true in our era, when the right to stand up for what you believe in, is extended not only to ethnic minorities, but to all beliefs. However, in spite of these advancements the attitude of 'I'm right, they're wrong' still prevails. Additionally, there may be instances where the school needs to come between the attitude of the parents and the child, to teach the child civic thinking, tolerance and respect instead of hate, prejudice and racism.

With the proliferation of a multitude of small schools, this would be very difficult to control and regulation could become an all consuming task. Fasano and Winder (1991: 24) believe that measures that would need to be taken to ensure that the government could be confident with regard to the upholding of state or nationwide standards could prevent or constrain any local decision-making and professional judgement that might be desired:

> An alternative solution to a multitude of small schools could be a scenario whereby, as in several countries internationally, Australia could remove the distinction between public and private schools. Based on the premise that these schools 'operate under the same conditions and regulations as state schools' and in this manner 'denominational or secular non-government schools' could be incorporated into the government-managed system.
>
> (Grimshaw 2002: 19)

In the New South Wales Review, Grimshaw (2002: 10) also found that there was a call for 'the extent of government support for the non-government sector to be formally acknowledged through the establishment of a single, unified system of New South

Wales schools'. This would mean regardless of ownership and philosophy (public or private, mainstream or alternative) all schools would be similarly funded. Arguments in favour of this move were based on the fact that similar educational goals are desired and therefore these schools should be part of the same system. Support in the form of United Kingdom and New Zealand experiences were the main examples provided:

> It was argued that the government's responsibility for all students means it has an interest in ensuring all schools are capable of attaining comparable standards in terms of facilities and other resources. The public 'stake' in the outcome is therefore the same, irrespective of whether the school is privately or publicly owned and operated.
>
> (Grimshaw 2002: 10)

Many non-government schools are in fact mainstream schools run by non-government organisations or individuals rather than government. All that has occurred is the changing of just one or two facets of school life to suit a particular purpose.

The last of the major arguments to be addressed here, is the diversion of public funding away from public schools resulting in increased closure of public schools. The objections include that non-government schools are: already wealthy; funded at the expense of government schools; a waste of the publicly provided education dollar; not accountable for the funding they receive; taking away funding from public schools in dire need of assistance; preventing public system growth; inhibiting excellence in public schools by preventing funding of high quality resources; counterproductive to a multicultural society; and undermining confidence in public education (National Council of Independent Schools' Association 2002: 1-4).

With the resurgence of the debate over public versus private education, Australia has once again started arguing about issues of funding and which system is better. Focus has moved away from the perhaps more pressing discussion concerning whether alternative education/schooling could be better structured to promote a pluralistic, multicultural society. There are those who, like myself, see no reason why the mainstream education system could not provide an education for every child in a range of schools. Ensuring a public education system that is cognisant of the differing needs of groups within society would mean the end of the perceived need for 'alternative' schools.

A POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD – A CONVERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE AND MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

Placing 'alternative education' solely in the realms of religion, ethnicity and others who do not 'fit' will lock society into a model of difference. There will continue to be prejudice against difference while we continue to separate out those characteristics that are seen as non-conforming to mainstream society. It has been stated that public schools seek to conform so strictly to mainstream societal values that they have been accused of becoming 'values neutral' by Australia's Prime Minister, John Howard whose comments that parents are concerned some public schools may have become 'too politically correct' (video recording 2004) reignited the public versus private school debate.[3] This belief could be better explained by Macedo's statement:

> Schools that are somewhat detached from the particular values and prejudices of families and neighbourhoods, and that seek to include the diversity of society in a setting that insists on mutual respect and seeks to cultivate mutual

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[3] Public versus private: the education debate was televised on 'A Current Affair' on NWS 9, on January 21, 2004. Although John Howard was not present at the debate, this comment caused considerable comment from all areas of the education sector.

> understanding, may be especially good at teaching a range of liberal virtues: not only tolerance and mutual respect, but also openness to change, self-criticism moderation, and respect for the norms of public reasonableness. It may be, therefore, that what some parents object to in today's public schools is not the absence of moral values, but the substance of the moral values that are indeed present.
>
> (Macedo 2000: 125)

Macedo (2000: 125) also tells us that 'liberalism and weak-kneed neutralism' are not the same thing. However, this may push issues such as religious education firmly into the hands of the alternative, safely out of the reach of mainstream, publicly-educated children. For Roma, Australia's public schools are so mainstream value laden that Romani many parents feel oppressed by their presence. Completing school through an 'alternative school' such as a Steiner School does not make that child less able to function in our society. It has not polarised our communities, setting the children who attend these schools and the adults they later become apart from the rest. Applying this logic, it is difficult to understand why, if there were a broader variety of alternative schools, this would suddenly cause problems for society. Maybe because there have been so few choices in schooling for so long that we have decided that choice is polarising. But it is imperative that choice extends beyond the parent being able to choose to which school they will send their children, assuming they have the financial resources available to enable that choice. It must now address how choice in the place of learning and sharing knowledge become accessible to all families.

Fundamental belief in the usefulness of the current model of mass schooling and the apparently steadfast refusal to consider alternate models is perhaps evidence of the self-belief of Western cultural supremacy. The schooling culture as we know it is a modern invention, in that it only gathered support in the middle of the Nineteenth Century

(Macdeo 2000: 45). For Illich's dream of a de-schooled society to become a reality, we would need to do away with modern society at least insofar as it is a society that dictates that we go to work regularly (at least thirty-eight and a half hours every week), that prescribes that we should delegate the education of our own children to others by sending them into someone else's care in a mainstream school. Illich (1971: 11) does indeed use persuasive, often hypnotic arguments to encourage readers to accept his beliefs. His work portrays modern western society as one becoming increasingly dependent on institutions, in fact he even uses dying as an example of our over-use of such institutions (hospitals in this case).[4] The difficulty is that to implement Illich's radical changes would require such massive change in society's thinking that right here, right now, the answers cannot be found within his ideology which describes the 'what' but not the 'how' in a practical sense.

Edgar (1999) addresses the above issues and more in his paper 'Options for Schooling – Queensland 2010' (See also Appendix 6) in which he describes the implications of the changing nature of society on education. Edgar's ideas could change the face of education and schooling in Australia, particularly for minority groups such as the Romani people. In this paper Edgar puts forward options for consideration during the planning stages of Queensland Education's strategy for the coming decades. He believes that the traditional state of mainstream schooling could be likened to two models in particular. The first is the old industrial model, in which the factory transformed 'raw materials into a product which met standardised quantity and quality requirements'. The

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[4] This assertion could be based on non-Western cultural thinking. For example, the Romani people will not allow their relatives to die in a hospital. Whenever possible they will remove the person to another place of rest. This will often not be the person's home as it is also considered marimé to pass on in your home.

second outdated model that needs to be changed is that of the prison: 'taking young people off the hands of other adults, controlling pupils' behaviour rather than cultivating knowledge, skills and understanding'. The paper describes a number of requirements for a more 'alternative' mainstream education, one that fulfils the needs of a multicultural mainstream society:

> Schools have to find new ways of helping students understand the complexity and unpredictability of life in the knowledge society. Schools must themselves become 'learning organizations' in the fullest sense, open to new ideas and drawing upon a wider range of learning resources in their communities and beyond.
>
> (Edgar 1999: 1)

Edgar believes that society may even be ready for the implementation of a modified version of Illich's (1971) concept of deschooling, at least in secondary schools, through educational networks and learning webs, easily powered by the technology now available. In fact, many of Edgar's recommendations and options for mainstream (public) schools are very reminiscent of the characteristics sought after by 'alternative schools' as described by Young (1990: 2-3) stated earlier in this chapter. The options described by Edgar are consolidated here:

- Encourage schools to both network and specialise in what could be called 'Education Clusters', sharing resources, exchanging teachers, linked to community-based family support systems, local libraries and other education and business organisations. These clusters would be natural groupings to emerge over time out of cooperative initiatives across areas that make such cooperation practical.

- Establish a 'Core Curriculum Board' which would develop a minimum core of education outcomes to be achieved in each school, in whatever way they choose, leaving substantial room for additional specialist and innovative areas of study to be determined by the schools themselves, based on community needs and staffing strengths. This 'core curriculum' would include what is called 'the public language of citizenship', civic and social education essential to the functioning of a multicultural democratic society.

- Reconfiguration of key roles within the education system. The school principal would be the leading academic professional (master teacher) in the school working in partnership with the professional administrator (school manager). The teacher role could begin as a supervised position (assistant teacher) under the supervision of experts who guide the learning process (teachers). These changes could enhance the status of teachers as 'knowledge navigators' essential to the future lives of children in our schools. Professional development would be more prominent and could take the form of industry sabbaticals outside the schools. Much secondary school teaching could be contracted out to TAFE and other training institutions. Administrative responsibilities could be consolidated with one administrative unit being responsible for several small schools (clusters).

- Reconfiguration of educational IT systems to allow the linking of these clusters of small schools with other schools, local libraries, TAFE and other colleges, possibly drawing in welfare agencies and businesses involved in work experience and job training.

- Formation of 'Community Hubs' linking child care, youth and ethnic community services, non-government welfare agencies, and business human resource managers. An integral component of these hubs would also need to be other government departments such as Human Services, the Police, and Health Departments. This would require the central government bureaucracy to remove barriers to such collaboration with the integration all of the 'human services' related departments. Each school cluster could also form its own links depending on the needs of its community.

- 'The Government must seize the day, cut through the theoretical and academic niceties, recognise that investment in children at this level will pay off in myriad ways (preventing child abuse, lack of thriving, ill-health, school failure, early dropout, poor job chances, delinquency and crime in later life) and ensure that every child has access to both quality child care and pre-school programs'. The government and community must recognise that quality child care (even without specific educational programs), play groups, parent education programs, creative playgrounds, mobile children's book and toy libraries, are all part of preparing children for schools, absolutely essential in disadvantaged areas where parental resources are lacking. Unless children are 'ready to learn' when they start formal schooling, much of the teachers' time is wasted and the cost to the community at large is huge.

- Establish a 'Readiness to Learn Inquiry' to highlight what is known from research and indicate ways in which early childhood services can be better integrated into the pre-school and early primary school years.

- Consider making all primary schools a community hub, or a learning centre for more than just the teaching/learning of primary school students. Kindergartens, infant health and child care centres and after-school care programs could all be more closely linked, even co-located, with primary schools

- Focus on practical competence as well as the linguistic and logical-mathematical skills.

Edgar also presented options for middle and senior schools although these are not presented here. Such a configuration of the education environment would enable the establishment of more *Sikavnia* such as ours, but as integral components of, rather than alternatives to, the mainstream system.[5]

The bureaucratic institutions that modern governments have created and on which they rely (including, of course, schools) in some sense depend on the acquiescence and acceptance of their legitimacy by the population they serve. It is this very legitimacy that is denied by the Rom, whose core group identity outweighs any other social obligation, commitment or identity. All that the Rom really want is to be allowed to be Rom – but this is the challenge for the societies in which they live, because being Rom

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[5] *Sikavnia* is the plural of *Sikavni*.

necessarily means not being something else (Reagan 2000:172). The main problem in Australia, as in the USA, is that reliance on external funding for survival is a sure way to invite death of any school venture. But because of their unique cultural heritage, the Roma are not readily willing to invest in formal mainstream education for their children, although I and others such as Hancock (1999) believe that this may change in future generations.

SUMMARY

This chapter has presented an argument for the maintenance and maybe even expansion of alternative education in Australia, be it through the government or non-government system. The arguments presented in this chapter have addressed Smith's (1997: 6-18) barriers to equitable access to education highlighted in Chapter 2. These included: recognition of individual differences; children who are considered adults in their own community; the class system and schools; the deleterious effects of inappropriately applied psychological testing; entrenched community beliefs; entrenched mainstream society conceptions; lack of satisfaction expressed in regard to mainstream schools (public and private); community acceptance of schooling; the *Sikavni* as a working model; and the broader issues of choice in a multicultural democracy.

Chapter 7 initially traces the history and different phases of the development of the *Sikavni* from 1992 to 2004. Following this chapter's argument for the maintenance and maybe even expansion of alternative education in Australia (through either the government or non-government system), the chapter then examines the role of the *Sikavni* as an alternative to conventional mainstream education.

Chapter 7

Genesis and Development of the Sikavni

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the historical journey of the *Sikavni*. It encompasses the transformation of the Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language (1992 to 1998) from a casual language and dance school to the *Sikavni*, a home-schooling community centre (1998 to 2004). This chapter proposes that the *Sikavni* could be defined as the community component of a 'public alternative school' as described by Edgar (1999) in Chapter 6.

HISTORY OF THE *SIKAVNI* 1992 TO 1998

The 'Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language' was the predecessor of the *Sikavni*. The former school (incorporated in 1992) offered Gypsy, Flamenco and Egyptian dancing classes, guitar, piano and violin lessons, Romani language instruction and cultural activities. Classes were available for Romani and non-Romani children and adults and were held at Nanyeta's Gypsy Taverne in Adelaide on a regular basis and across Australia according to the travel plans of the individual instructors. This school played an integral role in keeping Romani culture alive in Australia and in informing the Australian mainstream about Romani culture.

HISTORY OF THE *SIKAVNI* 1998 TO 2004

In mid 1998, the 'Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language' added a centre where (Romani) children could get together to do their distance education work. Romani children enrolled in the distance mode in any state were encouraged to attend and other activities such as dancing and singing sessions were often organised to break up the day and as an energy outlet. There was, of course, the added benefit of help with their distance education work. For children who had no work, another child's work would be photocopied so no one felt left out. Some days there were only one or two children, other days there were many more. This change came about due to a series of events that started in early 1998 with the enrolment of a family of Romani children in an alternative school. Marcia continues her story about the education of her children that she started in Chapter 6 (page 177):

> It all got out of control [at the alternative school] and after three weeks, I didn't want my kids to go any more. We took them away.
>
> We tried to enrol them with a distance education school in Victoria. We, my sister[-in-law] and I, decided that we would tell them that we were going to live in Victoria and travel. We even got a Victorian address. The distance education school would not take our kids, and my sister got really upset, she couldn't understand why not. We went to visit them and we took my daughter to show them how much we wanted our children to go there. It took something like two face-to-face visits and lots of phone calls before we convinced them that we not only wanted our children to be educated but that we could cope with the distance part.
>
> In the end, what did it was on one of the visits, my sister said she was illiterate and didn't want her children to be illiterate too. She told them how we had asked a cousin to travel with us to help with the children's education because she could read and write. It was only a little lie, she's not fully illiterate, she left school early but she can read and write a bit. At first, even after that, we still thought they were going to say no so my sister went to see them again and this time she really got upset and all hysterical. The tears were real, we didn't know what we were going to do if they said 'no'.

> They did say 'yes' in the end and all the children went there very happily for nearly three years. The distance education school was happy because they were bright kids and learned fast and we were happy because they were learning. They only left the distance education school because there was a special Romani place set up in Adelaide and we didn't have to travel so much anymore.
>
> (Marcia, Interview Q26, 6 October 2001)

The formal structure of the *Sikavni* was not conceived until 1999 and came about due to the following circumstances. In January 1999, Louise was enrolled at a mainstream suburban school. She was not happy in school and things went awry. In September, 1999, two 'Student Attendance Counsellors' went to see David and Susan because Louise had not been attending school. Louise was now enrolled in a local school, however, the family had been travelling a lot and Louise had not been in school for some weeks. One September morning, David opened the door to these two 'older women' who asked why Louise had not been attending school. In a panic, because it was pretty obvious that the kids (more than one) were home, he replied that Louise was not attending the local school because she was enrolled in 'the Gypsy School' (David, Interview Q33, 3 February 2002).

As a result, Louise and her sister Katie started coming to the centre for three days each week. Open Access 'schoolwork' was photocopied for them to complete and reluctantly they began to settle in. One of the agreements reached with the Student Attendance Counsellors was that the centre would apply to be registered as a non-government school as this would then satisfy the needs of enrolment in a school for Louise and Katie.

In October 1999, a notification of intention to apply for registration of a non-government school was lodged and the initial development of the *Sikavni* began, culminating in the Open Access College in South Australia creating a 'Romani' category of enrolment, as illustrated through the following events.

The Proposal for Registration of a Non-Government School

One of Morrow's recommendations from her prior research was to create 'a system parallel to the open access system' that would allow 'students to progress at a rate commensurate with their abilities' (Morrow 1998: 239-240). The proposal for the Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language was written with this aim through several Romani *Kris* meetings spread between September and October 1999.[1] The proposal was for a face-to-face school incorporating distance learning options to accommodate travel. It was submitted to the South Australian Non-Government Schools Secretariat in December 1999 and supported by ten community organisations. A summary of the main reason for submitting the proposed school for registration read:

> Provision of junior/primary schooling for Romani (Gypsy) children, many of whom have little or no prior schooling. It is envisaged that this will mean that the grouping of children will be according to ability rather than age ... We are intending to access and implement an established school curriculum, with regard to the eight key learning areas ... our aim is to encourage more of the Romani children living in South Australia to attend school and gain basic literacy and mathematics skills which will give them a choice of continuing their education.
>
> (Morrow 1999: 1)

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[1] A Romani *Kris* is commonly defined as a trial to decide guilt or innocence presided over by the adult males of a community. However in this context, the community was defining it as the body of community elders with the final decision making power in all matters relating to the *Sikavni*.

In the meetings with the Executive Officer of the Planning Committee and the Registrar of the Registration Board, several discussions were held as to why it was felt necessary to start the school outlined in the proposal instead of persevering with the public school system, including the Open Access Schools (state run distance education schools). The most commonly stated reason for denial of entry of Romani children (including key participants in this case study) into Open Access Schools was that although the families travelled frequently for work, their travel did not always fall in the school terms and often families stopped in a district or town for some months. If a family stopped travelling for three weeks or more, then during that time the children could be enrolled in and attend the local school. This meant that there would be no schooling for the children whilst they were travelling. Therefore, the proposal included indication that the school would run for fifty weeks a year over six days a week, enabling the children to attend for as many of those days as they could, but giving them extra time over the mainstream school holidays to catch up if they had fallen behind in their work.

During the life of the application, discussions were also held with the Manager of School Restructuring within the Department of Education, Training and Employment, the Independent Schools Board, the SA Commission for Catholic Schools, the Independent Schools Board and several other independent schools to negotiate access to a suitable curriculum. A local Islamic School donated their curriculum to the *Sikavni*. Another of the requirements for registration of a non-government school is that the application for registration must be submitted concurrently with an application for government funding. Prior to approval, all applications received are published by the Registration Board for comment. Any person enquiring about a specific proposal is

given a copy and applicants are requested to make contact with the person concerned to discuss any issues arising. Two respondents were identified, the Manager of School Restructuring within the Department of Education, Training and Employment and the SA Commission for Catholic Schools. Contact was made with both parties and their concerns regarded the availability of alternative options, including home schooling and the mainstream schools from which the enrolling students would be coming.

Soon after the Registration Board published the application, a journalist phoned the applicant to discuss the application. Questions were asked and answered truthfully and naively, in hindsight. The journalist requested information in the form of a written submission and this information was given. On Sunday February 27, 2000, the journalist's article appeared in the state-based newspaper. The title of the article was 'Gypsies push for own school' (Crouch 2000: 13). A copy of the article can be found in Appendix 3. There were many Roma who believed that the article was racist but it is possible that given that it is in the nature of journalistic endeavour to stimulate public debate, the article may have reflected this endeavour:

> The State Government would fund a private school for about 25 gypsy children in the Adelaide suburbs under a proposal being considered by officials.
>
> The move comes amid ongoing closures of public schools, with 103 closed or amalgamated by the present Liberal and previous Labor governments.
>
> (Crouch 2000: 13)

Whatever the intent, the article was a controversial piece that stirred community emotions and not less than six Roma familia had left Adelaide by Sunday night (taking their children with them). A letter to the editor in response to this article appeared the

following week and this caused even further distress to the Romani community (see Appendix 3). A *Kris* meeting was called and many of the elders in the community expressed their anger at the article and the letter. Many Romani community members believed that the sentiment in the article was intended to portray the Roma in a demeaning and racist manner, belittling both culture and heritage. The 'invisibleness' of the Roma had been stripped away there was a strong feeling that 'the ways of the Roma should not have been exposed to the Gajé' (Participant, Personal Communication, 2 March 2000). The outcome of the *Kris* was that the proposal would be withdrawn immediately. Despite the intense disappointment expressed by elders of the community, this was to be effected immediately. A response to the article and letter was drafted at the *Kris* meeting:

> It is easy for others to criticize cultures and cultural beliefs when they do not know anything about them. It is not so easy to see a problem, recognize that it must be addressed and to stand up for the rights of our children.
>
> The Romani people have been living in Australia since the 1800s and we consider that both the article that caused the letter to the editor and the letter itself are evidence of prejudice and racism. The letter to the editor implies that we are all lazy and do not want to live within Australian law. This is not the case at all and we believe that due to this publicity we have been condemned as a race.
>
> 'One in five kids fail on literacy' (David Nankervis, Sunday Mail March 5, 2000) speaks volumes. The public education system does NOT cater for all children and if the Government cannot or will not provide an education for our children then we have no option but to do it for ourselves. We do not think this is too much to ask.
>
> There are many Romani (Gypsy) people living in Australia who move constantly for their work which means they need to travel. Surely, this is better than being a drain on taxpayers funds by staying in one city on the dole.
>
> It would seem that Australia does not want to, or is not capable of providing an education for our children if we find our work on the road and yet we are criticized if we want to do this for ourselves.
>
> (*Kris* Meeting, 2 March 2000)

There were also several other letters written by individuals however, none of the responses from Romani people were published by the newspaper. It appeared that the journalist's main issue was not that a private school was being set up, but that government funds would be used to support it:

> The Government intends to close or amalgamate another 30 schools by 2002 to save $5 million and has cut the school year by a week to save money.
>
> Education department officials met with Gypsy representatives last week to discuss the application for registration and State funding for the school.
>
> (Crouch 2000: 13)

Attempts were made to apply for registration without the concurrent State and Commonwealth Government funding but these attempts were not successful. For the Romani community, the most discouraging part of this episode was that it was never the intention of the school to ask for financial assistance. The advice given to the applicants was that the proposal would not be considered if a simultaneous application for financial support was not made.

The over simplification and misquoting of the fears and beliefs of the Romani people confirmed the belief of the Romani community that they should remain isolated from mainstream society. This incident also illustrates the characteristic strong response of Roma faced with negative criticism due, in no small part, to the historical treatment of Roma (for example, the Holocaust, persecution, pogroms in Eastern and Central Europe). Fear of backlash is very real and ingrained into the consciousness of Roma because it forms part of current and recent history. This leads to feelings of concern and insecurity and the desire to flee when faced by media exposure. This incident illustrates

the theory that giving information to the media allows the construction of images from a particular viewpoint:

> Images can be used – worked on and worked with – to package meanings that fulfil particular social function to support government policy, to bolster stereotypes and also to confront and contradict taken for granted assumptions about the world around us.
>
> (Dougal & Luca 1998: 22)

These images, even if they are misrepresented, are often mainstream culture's only point of contact with aspects of the world it will never experienced directly (Dougal & Luca 1998: 21). Although not addressed through this research, this incident raises the question of how mainstream society can learn about Roma culture and traditions in a positive way.

This series of events also illustrates how important it is for applicants, Roma or not, to have the necessary knowledge and mainstream political know-how to pull the right levers and lobby to get the support they need. Soon after, the application was denied. One of the official reasons was:

> Meeting the [eight key areas of the] curriculum objectives normally requires students to attend school for 5¼ – 5½ hours of instruction per day 5 days a week and for a minimum of 40 weeks per year. Information provided by you during our discussions indicates that the students would not be enrolled for the time stated above.
>
> (McDonald, Personal Communication, 29 February 2000)

After the application for registration as a non-government school was abandoned, work commenced on finding an alternative solution. The impetus for this alternative turned out to be that the journalist (Crouch 2000: 13) had stated that 'Education department officials met with Gypsy representatives last week'. This statement apparently impelled

an investigation and prompt action was taken (Pender, Personal Communication, 28 February 2000).

The Genesis of the Sikavni

The Open Access College was approached by a representative of the Planning Committee for Non-Government Schools. On April 4, 2000 the first of several meetings was held with representatives of the Open Access College and the Romani community. The outcome of these meetings and their negotiations was the successful creation of the 'Romani School' category of enrolment with the Open Access College in November 2000. The Romani community believes that the success of these negotiations was in no small part due to the positive response of the new Open Access Principal to requests for collaboration with the Romani community.

ENROLMENTS IN THE SIKAVNI 2000 TO 2004

The number of students enrolled in the Open Access College *Sikavni* has varied considerably over the three years of its operation:

- Initially there were seven enrolments and of these, four commenced in November 2000, one girl and three boys;
- By March 2001, there were an additional four students enrolled, two girls and two boys;
- In August 2002, a further three girls enrolled, but by then two girls had left the *Sikavni* as they moved to Sydney permanently. Shortly after this two boys moved to country Victoria;

- In early 2003, three students moved to Melbourne but remained enrolled in the Open Access School. They fell behind after about four months and gradually dropped out;
- At the time of writing, there were five students officially enrolled, three girls and two boys. Three of these students are the same as the initial cohort. Two of the girls who moved to Sydney in 2003 have indicated that they may return to the *Sikavni* in mid to late 2004.
- There are also one girl and one boy who are expected to start in Term 3 of 2004.

Given the original enthusiasm for the *Sikavni*, the seven original enrolments and four starting students was a disappointment. The number was considerably lower than the twenty-five children whose parents had expressed interest. The high drop-out rate was seen to be due to the incidents surrounding the *Sikavni* before its commencement and the fears of the perceived racist attitude escalating once the *Sikavni* started.

Ethnic School Attendees

The number of children attending the 'ethnic school' component, but not enrolling in the Open Access College has been extremely varied and attendance of these children has been erratic. Some of these are children whose parents have seen it as beneficial for their children to attend the *Sikavni* for cultural purposes, but not to enrol their children in the 'government' school. Some children are enrolled in other schools or distance education schools in other states and the *Sikavni* is supporting their education, providing a drop-in service whilst they are in Adelaide. Many of these children are travelling for economic and employment reasons. It is neither a role of, nor a legal requirement of, the

Sikavni to police the children who are not enrolled in a mainstream school and no child is required to declare their enrolment status. No child has ever been turned away, as a community resource, the community believes that all children should be free to come as they wish.

THE SIKAVNI: AN ALTERNATIVE TO MAINSTREAM SCHOOLING

As with the Circus School, the *Sikavni* could be defined as the community component of a 'public alternative school' one of those of the type that Edgar (1999) promotes. This is because the *Sikavni* works with the Open Access College to provide 'alternative learning experiences to those provided by conventional schools and that is available by choice to every family within its community at no extra cost' (Smith cited in Young 1990: 2).

In the context of the *Sikavni*, the education provided by the Open Access School is mainstream, it is the environment that is alternative. The difficulty for the *Sikavni* is the way in which the children relate to it. To the children, the *Sikavni* is the same as any 'school'. They attend in set times (most of the time), they wear a uniform (of sorts) consisting of black trousers or skirt with red piping and a matching shirt (this is a preferred uniform rather than a required one).[2] It was found that wearing a uniform (even if not strictly enforced) encouraged the children to respond to the *Sikavni* more appropriately and it has increased their responsiveness to the type of discipline the

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[2] The only colour not permitted is pure white. In Romani tradition, white is the colour of peace, but it is too peaceful for the living to tolerate. Therefore although white mixed with other 'living' colours is permitted, pure white is not. It is entirely possible that the real roots of not wearing white is that when travelling constantly white can become grey and dirty very quickly, no matter how careful one might be and this is especially so for children.

Sikavni has in place. Without the use of a uniform to enhance discipline, the *Sikavni* was treated as a home away from home and the children behaved accordingly, in that they were less inclined to do their Open Access schoolwork and this in turn created discipline problems. Cher, in an interview made the statement that 'Home is for playing and doing chores' (Cher, Interview Q55, 28 March 2003), the concept of 'home is for schoolwork or homework' is not well grasped.

The official designation of the *Sikavni* (that it is not a school) is not always well understood, particularly by the children and this has been the cause of some concern as in 2002, when during a radio interview, one of the children at the *Sikavni* described his experiences at his 'school'.[3] This statement caused the *Sikavni* to be issued with a warning by the non-Government Schools Secretariat and it was asked to prove that it was not operating as a 'school'. In a letter responding to this request, Morrow (2002) replied:

> The service provided by the Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language is the same service that would be otherwise provided by the parents of the children enrolled in the Open Access School, the literacy skills of these parents precludes them from being able to assist their children to the extent required for the successful completion of their school work.

The supervisors are not teachers, nor are they perceived to be by the children or the adults. The distinction here is made more distinct by the definition of a teacher in the South Australian Education Act (1972) as 'a person who gives or is qualified to give instruction' in any course of pre-school, primary or secondary education. None of the supervisors at the school is qualified to give lessons, nor would they wish to, as this is

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[3] Further details of the Broadcast cannot be given here, to protect the anonymity of the participant.

clearly defined as a role of the teachers of the Open Access College. There is minimal dissatisfaction with the mainstream curriculum as it is offered to the children enrolled with the Open Access College. At the first sign of difficulty, alternative work is negotiated.

Traditional Romani education shares many features of education systems in other non-western cultures, the main one being that it is an oral tradition (Reagan 2000: 14). There are many aspects of mainstream schooling that are incorporated into traditional education provision but others are considered unnecessary, even in a formal school setting:

> When I went to school, in our early senior school years they taught the girls 'womanly' skills like cooking and sewing. I had been cooking since I was seven years old so the cooking class was a bit of a joke for me, but everyone did it so I joined in too. Later on they introduced typing as a 'modern new' class. I wanted to do it because my best friend was, but my mum was really angry, she said that I would never be anyone's secretary and could learn to type later if I really thought I would ever use it. She said that she wasn't paying for me to go to school to learn idiot stuff. I think what upset her the most is that she thought I wanted to be a secretary and get a job instead of working for the family business – as if that would ever happen. I worked for [a fast food company] when I was fifteen, I lasted two years, but it made me decide that no matter how good the money, I didn't want to work for someone else ever again. It's funny, but as it turned out, the typing class would have been good because I can type now, slowly with six fingers but it used to be two.
>
> (Marcia, Interview Q26, 6 October 2001)

There is no intention at this stage to aim for integration of these *Sikavni* children into mainstream schools. To have this as a stated aim, would be seen by the Romani community as defeatist in attitude and would have doomed the *Sikavni* to failure from the beginning. Just as many mainstream parents have believed since the 1900s that mass

schooling is appropriate for their children, so many Romani parents believe that it is not. This is sentiment is illustrated by the statement of another parent:

> Look, don't get me wrong, I want my children to be educated, I want them to have the chance to be anything they want to be within reason, but, Australian schools are not fit places for children, especially not mine. There are too many stories that you hear and all the schools my kids have been to – and there's been at least four – there hasn't been one that wasn't either violent or racist or just plain wrong.
>
> (Victor, Interview Q27, 7 October 2001)

The lack of change in the calibre of comments from participants at either end of the research period, a time of eighteen months indicates that attitudes towards schooling have not changed. Susan, in her initial interview declared that sending her children back to the school in which they had previously been enrolled would be akin to 'sending them to Auschwitz'. When asked to explain her statement, she explained that the last attempt at schooling in 1997 had resulted in Roger being 'bitten, teased, tormented and bullied by the children'. Susan also believed that the bullying of Roger had been purposefully ignored and that he had consequently been accused of 'sexual harassment' by the adults in order to cover up the situation. Had this allegation become public knowledge in the Romani community, the consequence would have been that Roger, at the age of nine, would have been labelled *marimé* (Susan, Interview Q7, 29 August 2001). To ensure that this did not eventuate, Roger's parents removed him from school permanently and were prepared to travel constantly until his fifteenth birthday:

> I can't do it, you read that letter to the editor ... That's where I'd be sending our kids to, a racist place like that, I won't do it. They bit Roger last time and the school and teachers didn't and won't protect my children, they don't care about Gypsies. If there was another fight, they'd take the Gaji's side all over again, they'll always look after their own.
>
> (Susan, Interview Q7, 29 August 2001)

In 2004, as Roger prepares to turn sixteen, he and his parents are relieved that the nightmare is finally over.[4]

After considering the arguments above, it is possible to believe that for some children, without alternative education, there would be no education at all. Therefore, although it could be anticipated that eventual transition into school may be an outcome, I believe that it will not be in this generation. It may be, though, that those children who have been educated – for however brief a time period, will look at their children and their role in a future society and decide that schooling is appropriate. The decision to educate or not, to school or not, will always be based on their personal experiences in the education system. Several of the children have had very successful experiences and are progressing well with the Open Access College. If the *Sikavni* is successful at preparing these children for entry into secondary education, with the agreement of the parents, attending a secondary or high school may be a viable option if distance learning ceases to be an option.

Using Morley's (1991: 1) definition of alternative education being based upon the belief that there are also many ways in which children can be educated (including the need for different environments), then the *Sikavni* provides an alternative education holding strongly to the philosophies and ideals of an alternative school. The *Sikavni* did not set out with the ideal of changing the quality of knowledge or the ways in which it was learned. The argument has never been with the actual content of the majority of the

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[4] The school leaving age was not raised from fifteen to sixteen in South Australia until 2002.

curriculum (the exception being sex education) or its structure, but rather the environment in which it is taught.

To date, the physical structure of the *Sikavni* for children enrolled in the Open Access College is very much modelled on that of a regular school, with its timetable, blackboard and school desks. This was, interestingly, very reassuring for most of the parents and encouraged an atmosphere of learning for the children, affording them an environment in which they could concentrate. The *Sikavni* has to a certain extent achieved that which it set out to do, educate young (and older) Romani children in an environment in which they feel comfortable. To facilitate the mainstream curricular activities, regular telephone lessons conducted by the Open Access College are held with students. Group lessons are also held in which the *Sikavni* children and other mainstream children share their experiences.

The *Sikavni* also fits in many ways the definition of a community school ie: controlled by the community which has a high degree of involvement in its governance, 'consciousness in the curriculum and the school's participation in the struggle for equality' (Graubard 1976: 68; Evers & Chapman 1995). However in reality, it is controlled by the *Kris*, a select group of individuals within the community rather than the community itself. The parents have, for the most part, disengaged from the mainstream educational aspect of the *Sikavni*, leaving that to the 'surrogate parent'.

The Impact of Sharing the Curriculum

As is standard practice in South Australia, the mainstream curriculum, as provided by the Open Access College, follows the National Statements and Profiles as set down by the Education Council of Australia. Mainstream studies include (but are not limited to) English, Mathematics and Science & Technology run by the Open Access College and enrolled students are able to utilise the Open Access teachers and resources. Some, but not all parents have also chosen to include Health in their children's subjects. Steering the whole the curriculum is a joint venture, requiring the cooperation of the Principals, teachers and the community.

The parents have no real interest in the curriculum as they have faith that the *Kris* will ensure that all studies undertaken by the children are culturally appropriate. They are satisfied that the *Sikavni* has to conform to certain aspects of a 'normal' school provided the environment is culturally sound. It is arguable that the children are being exposed less completely to the mainstream 'hidden curriculum' (Print 1993: 11) as responsibility for the whole curriculum is shared between the *Sikavni* and the Open Access College.

On the surface, it would appear that a discussion of the educational curriculum of an organisation that is not a school is irrelevant. However, the *Sikavni* has responsibility for its own cultural programmes including: language, history, religion and customs. Music and dance classes taught at the *Sikavni* include guitar, singing, Gypsy dancing (Serbian, Russian, Ukrainian and Egyptian), magic, violin, acrobatics and gymnastics. Some children attend outside classes as well and these include Cirkidz (the Adelaide Circus School), Ukranian folk, jazz and tap dancing, plus sports such as football, cricket

and swimming. These outside classes ensure that the children mix with other cultures and are therefore, not culturally isolated. The parents appear to be more comfortable about their children attending these types of classes (as compared to those in mainstream schools) perhaps because these types of organisations are not perceived to be concerned with instilling mainstream values.

The administrative personnel of the *Sikavni* have no control over the content of the mainstream curriculum subjects at a micro level, but the flexibility of control does allow some measure of parental control at the macro level, that is, in which subjects the children will be enrolled. The *Sikavni* is more concerned with the construction of the timetable, how to keep the children interested and how to ensure that the parents enrol their children formally in the *Sikavni*. All the supervisors and most of the music and dance teachers are Roma and so it is not a concern if the timetable changes more regularly than a conventional organisation. A copy is given to each teacher and it is more widely distributed at *Kris* meetings and on request to parents.

SUMMARY

In searching for the answer to the research question 'how can quality learning outcomes be assured in the Australian context?' I examined the quality of educational experience of the children at the *Sikavni* and asked the question 'What are we trying to achieve with the *Sikavni*? The answers were varied and highlighted the lack of understanding of the parents, children and community about education, schooling and the Education Act.

Being concerned with issues of separatism surrounding alternative schooling I needed to clarify whether the Romani community saw the function of the *Sikavni* as a transition to school or as an alternative to schooling. I believe from my research that the Romani people have no clear concept of education and confuse it with literacy as evidenced by the statement from one parent below. Agreement with this statement was echoed around the room. It demonstrates a belief held by many parents who believed that they had achieved for their children all that needed to be done.

Of no concern to the other parents, but of great concern to this researcher when looking for quality of experience is whether the *Sikavni* model is considered alternative or mainstream or a mixture of both? The statement below was used to stimulate discussion at a *Kris* meeting in Adelaide in March 2003:

> The *Sikavni* has been going now for two and a half years and we need to look at what we have achieved and how the *Sikavni* is going. I want to start the ball rolling by telling you what I think and then you can tell me if you think I'm right or wrong and what you think.
>
> One of the most important things we need to be careful of as a community is that we don't shut our children completely out of contact with the Gajé. They will need, as we do, to interact with others for work and a variety of other reasons. The *Sikavni* and all it stands for is to allow our children to be educated in an environment they find and we find to be safe. It has to ensure that it upholds Romani values and stays true to the traditional ways while allowing our kids a chance to be a part of the world. And making sure that the government knows we're sending our kids to school.
>
> We even made a policy that says that all assistants and external teachers must not give the children any information that is intended to introduce values or opinions not in accordance with or contrary to Romani customs. So from that point of view, we've got it working well. One question that is always facing us is what we'll do if the *Sikavni* stops operating? And another is if we should try to encourage children to stay enrolled in the Open Access College even when they're not children any more.
>
> (Colleen, Personal Communication, 17 March 2003)

The response from one of the participating parents, Susan, sums up the attitude of the parents and community in the meeting: she stood up in response and said that while she thought the *Sikavni* was doing a great job, she had other reservations:

> Louise can read and write now, but she doesn't really need to do the Open Access work anymore. Besides I need her at home to help me and watch the boys when I get work. There's not that much work out there that I can afford to keep saying no all the time. I still don't understand why she needs to keep going. I know the government says she has to but they don't understand about having enough money to live.
> And, if the *Sikavni* wasn't there, I'd just keep my kids home and if we got caught like last time then instead of being stupid and staying put, we'd just go. Its better that way when the government doesn't know where you are or what you're doing, I like it that way. ... So to answer your question, on behalf of pretty much everyone here, I can say that if there wasn't a *Sikavni*, my kids wouldn't be going to a Gajé school and when they're finished with the *Sikavni*, they still won't be going to a Gajé school, but when they're not kids anymore, they should be able to finish school and work with us.
>
> (*Kris* Elders, Interview Q51, 17 March 2003)

Chapters 6 and 7 have addressed some of the barriers to equitable access to education highlighted in Chapter 2. These included: recognition of individual differences; children who are considered adults in their own community; the class system and schools; the deleterious effects of inappropriately applied psychological testing; entrenched community beliefs; entrenched mainstream society conceptions; lack of satisfaction expressed in regard to mainstream schools (public and private); community acceptance of schooling; the *Sikavni* as a working model; and the broader issues of choice in a multicultural democracy.

Chapter 8 investigates the physical and cultural structure of the *Sikavni* through a comprehensive analysis of the organisation utilising an open social system perspective, applying conventional rules and descriptors to an unconventional institution.

Chapter 8

Structural & Cultural Nature of the Sikavni

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the main findings of the research arising from the fieldwork stages of the study. Focus is on the structural and cultural organisation of the *Sikavni.* Key issues examined include the curriculum, roles of *Sikavni* personnel, implementation of rules and regulations and the role of parents, all of which will confront the *Sikavni* as it continues to grow. The theoretical frame used here to analyse these aspects is an open social system perspective.

ORGANISATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The *Sikavni* does not conform to the structure of a typical mainstream educational organisation, nor does it follow a true Weberian model, insofar as it is very much a political-type organisation, run by a Principal/Administrator under direction of a Romani *Kris* which has no awareness of theories of organisational management. The *Sikavni* therefore has offered a unique opportunity to study an educational organisation prototype.

Reliance on pure organisational theory, such as Weber's bureaucracy, may result in adequate description of the physical organisation, but would neglect the cultural and political facets, leaving behind a two-dimensional portrayal of a multi-dimensional entity. Morgan (1997: 348) assures us that:

> All theories of organisation and management are based on implicit images or metaphors that persuade us to see, understand and imagine situations in partial ways... in creating ways of seeing, they create ways of *not* seeing. Hence there can be no single theory or metaphor that gives an all-purpose point of view.

Relying on Morgan's (1997: 348) assertion that 'there can be no 'correct theory' for structuring everything we do', this analysis also utilises an open social system perspective that combines 'rational and natural elements in the same framework' to provide as true a picture of the whole organisation as possible (Hoy & Miskel 2001: 1). Some of the key features of the *Sikavni* that are best supported by an open system model are its ability to adapt to and influence its environment, the inter-dependability of members and its ability to change according to circumstances. The open social system perspective describes the four key elements of schools as social systems, as the structure (formalised bureaucratic expectations), the individual (cognition and motivation), the culture (the shared orientations of the individuals) and the politics (informal power relationships). Organisational behaviour in this context is then described as being the interaction of these four elements in the context of the school environment (Hoy & Miskel 2001: 18-28). Hoy and Miskel (2001: 38) describe their model as a synthesis and extension of the pioneering work of Getzels and Guba (1967 in Hoy and Miskel 2001: 38) and other key theorists. It is Hoy and Miskel's model that forms the basis of the open system analysis in this thesis.

STRUCTURE (FORMALISED BUREAUCRATIC EXPECTATIONS)

Organisational Structure of the *Sikavni*

Analysis of the structure of the *Sikavni* as a social school system, in fact as any type of traditional system, is a difficult task because the traditional teaching-learning relationships between student and teacher have been replaced by a three-tiered model: Student – Supervisor – Teacher. The teachers are not physically located in the *Sikavni*, but interact with the children regularly. The older children who help the younger ones are called assistant supervisors and this helps them to identify as assistants in the learning process rather than learners, a factor that has been important in developing their personal learning skills. The Head Supervisor is Pauline, who is sometimes assisted by parents wanting to participate. The supervisors are most often siblings and cousins of the children attending the *Sikavni*.

This physical description of the *Sikavni* has incorporated the Weberian model, albeit a simple adaptation. Weber's theory of organisations is dependent on description of organisational bureaucracy (Lunenburg and Ornstein 2004: 6). He places foremost emphasis on the impersonal (bureaucratic) division of labour and task specialisation, hierarchy of authority and the use of rules and regulation to define organisations (Hoy and Miskel 2001: 78-79). Taking the personal out of the bureaucracy exposes the administrative tenets of the organisation and although difficult in this instance, the analysis will form the foundation for future review of *Sikavni* operations. Overlaying and interweaving this description with findings from political and social theories of educational organisations, one builds a picture of the whole organisation in which the

'more subtle distinctions about the nature of organization and administration' are brought to the fore as well (Foster 1986: 9).

The *Sikavni* has developed a simple organisational structure that has served its purpose well (See Figure 6). This initial simplicity was a reflection of the desire of the participants not to replicate a 'typical mainstream school administrative structure, because the *Sikavni* is not a school' (Pauline, *Kris* Meeting, 2 March 2000). From this starting point, initial appointments were for an administrator who was responsible for all duties, including liaison with authorities such as the Non-Government Schools Registration Board and the Open Access College.[1] The depiction of the simplistic nature of the hierarchy of authority and responsibility within the *Sikavni* on its conception is shown in Figure 6 below. The white boxes indicate a role and the shaded boxes indicate a discrete function of that role.

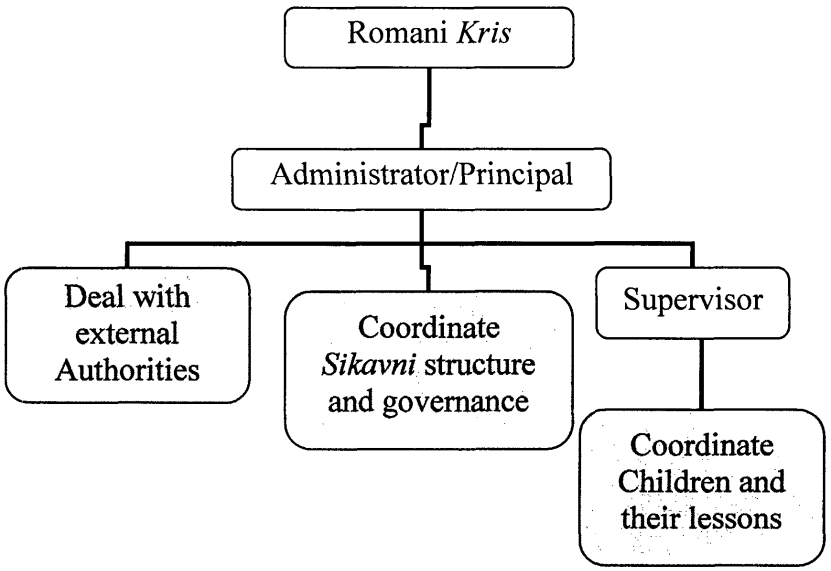

Figure 6: The Original Hierarchy of Authority in the *Sikavni*

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[1] The title of Principal is only used in correspondence with mainstream organisations. Any parent not attending *Kris* meetings would be unaware that such a position existed.

Over the four years of *Sikavni* operation, the roles and their functions have developed and on occasion these positions may have been filled by more than one person. There is a lack of consciousness amongst the Romani people that one role belongs to one person and so when the need arose, individuals other than the one designated would take on the title – always with permission from the *Kris*. As unconventional as this might sound, it has allowed the community to share in the ownership of the *Sikavni*, thereby encouraging more parents to allow their children to participate. Figure 7 below shows that despite the increasing complexity of the organisation, the roles of the main players remain relatively unchanged, but it is their titles and perceptions of place in the hierarchy that have shifted over the four years of operation.

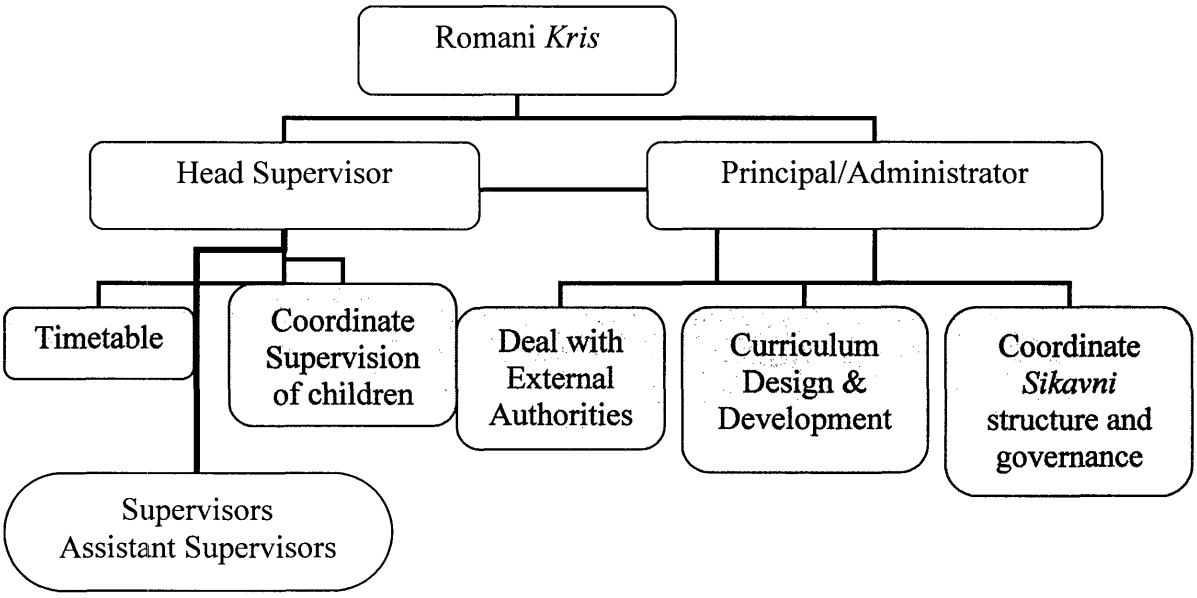

Figure 7: The Current Hierarchy of Authority in the *Sikavni*

The *Sikavni* – Open Access College Partnership

A major component of the organisational structure is the *Sikavni* – Open Access College partnership. The *Sikavni* interacts with the Open Access College via a 'Romani' category of enrolment. This arrangement distinguishes the Open Access College as the 'school' component and the *Sikavni* as the 'home' environment assisting the children as if they were at home. The *Sikavni* rather than the family is responsible for all materials loaned and/or given to the children and the collection and return of work set by the Open Access College.

One open access teacher is allocated to each student according to traditional school grades. In order to assess new children, examples of work are given where available and plus as much of a history as the administrator has been able to gather is given to the Open Access College to assist with assessment of academic ability. Given the past experiences of some of the children in the *Sikavni*, no child is permitted to undertake psychological assessment of any kind.[2]

Regular communication is maintained between the *Sikavni* and the Open Access College. There are at least two face-to-face meetings with the open access teachers each year and on occasion, a few of the children have participated in some day activities at the Open Access College. Telephone school lessons are held once or twice a week depending on the age of the child. For the older children, one of these lessons is a group session with other children enrolled in the Open Access College.

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[2] See Karen's story in W. Morrow, *Education and the Gypsy People of Australia: The Untold Story*, unpublished master's thesis, South Australia, 1998, p. 178.

Both the parents and the children perceive the *Sikavni* as lacking a formal school structure and this has been liberating in that the *Sikavni* is not perceived as having the kind of power that is generally associated with mainstream schools. Removing this concern of the parents has had the effect of leaving the children open to 'learn' as much as they can take in, and for some children learning has been at a surprising rate. The lack of formal holidays has enabled the children to carry on their learning on a more continuous basis, with breaks resulting from travelling for some families becoming further and further apart. It is this unique flexibility that has allowed the *Sikavni* to grow. The Open Access College takes responsibility for much of the administrative details associated with meeting academic requirements and ensuring the students reach an adequate academic age-related standard. This leaves the *Sikavni* to deal with ensuring that the learning environment is culturally appropriate and is one that encourages children to learn. Further discussion of this concept is presented in Chapter 9.

Another of the other major factors contributing to the success of the arrangement has been that the parents are not required to give their residential address to the 'government' because the *Sikavni* is acting 'in loco parentis':

> At least here I know they won't be able to watch my family and see what we do. ... When I enrolled Louise at the local school in [City], the form asked if she had any brothers or sisters so I listed Katie, thank goodness I didn't list any one else because the next year, about two weeks after the school year started, they came knocking on my door looking for Katie. They said that she had been listed on Louise's form and so she had to go to school.
>
> (Susan, Interview Q7, 29 August 2001)

All enrolled children have the address recorded as being at the *Sikavni*. Rightly or wrongly, this has eased fears of being 'tracked' though the system. At home, children often find it difficult to find a quiet place and adequate time to give proper attention to homework. Parents are not always supportive of children doing homework because it takes time away from the family and from household tasks. Parents instead see them isolated and concentrating on work that they do not understand that also has little contribution to make to family life:

> The subjects taught and the educational methods applied at schools are difficult to match with the values and attitudes of Gypsy families (Forray 1997). Gypsy families often expect the school to provide children with less than other families do: they solely expect the school to instruct school subjects while they consider it to be the task of the family to provide thorough education for the children. Even the children of the better-off Gypsy families fail to do their schoolwork on a regular basis. They do not do their homework, they are not given any help when studying at home, and they do not have separate rooms, desks or shelves where they could work or keep their school kits.
>
> (Hegedűs 1998: 28)

The *Sikavni* is a 'home schooling' environment, therefore children do not take work to their own home, unless exceptional circumstances apply. Additionally, the *Sikavni* has the potential to run for about fifty weeks each year, rather than following the traditional school terms which gives the children extra time to complete their work. Any work not completed in the time allocated by the Open Access College can be finished over the school holidays. The Open Access College teachers do not work with the *Sikavni* during the holiday period and there are no telephone lessons.

Rules and Regulations

Rules and regulations are a substantial component of every organisation and in the *Sikavni* these are directly linked to the hierarchy of authority (Weber quoted in Hoy and Miskel 2001: 78). Assistant supervisors often children themselves, given a position of authority with no power; their power is retained by the head supervisor (Hoy and Miskel 2001: 216). Their authority is only extended to assisting the small children to complete their work. The power of discipline is not part of this role. The children appear to have accepted this hierarchy and to date there have been no refusals of assistant's position to any child who considered themselves capable of helping. The stipulation is that in addition to doing their own work, they must help the younger children. Romani culture traditionally sees no period of adolescence life and younger children understand that the older children are adult figures because they have been so portrayed. The openness of the *Sikavni* has been a direct result of the perceived lack of a formal school hierarchy vested in one or more people. In particular, the lack of a 'teacher' has enabled one of the assistant supervisors to visualise her potential:

> It's given Catherine new ideas about what she can do with her life. She's been staying with the younger kids and helping them with their work. I think she's learned more than she thought because now she's got all these crazy ideas about being a chef. But she's got something I never had, not that I wanted it, but she's going to be okay.
>
> (Nicole, Interview Q40, 28 May 2002)

Many of the rules and regulations associated with the *Sikavni* are those required for cultural reasons. *Marimé* and its associated rules are never far from the minds of those running the *Sikavni*, for example, there is a strict dress code that may not be broken by supervisors, other staff or children and in particular, several spare skirts of varying sizes

are kept at the *Sikavni* to ensure there is no excuse for not complying with this rule.[3] For physical education sessions such as gymnastics, girls are required to wear shorts or long trousers with a short skirt over the top. Despite the fact that most of the children see this code as a nuisance, it is felt by the *Kris* to be a vital component of our heritage and therefore is strictly enforced.

Separate toilets and changing areas are provided for boys and girls. Girls must never be left alone in the company of a male adult and preferably not boys either as this is considered good practice. Food must always be eaten away from other activities, at a table, not on the floor. If there is no other choice but the floor, a mat must be laid for sitting and boxes used for tables (the food must always be higher than the waist). There are many other traditional rules that are well known to Roma, but not necessarily described here. Several of these were broken by a young Gaji supervisor called Nadia including rules like: above all, loyalty to the family comes first, even at the expense of others; no visiting grave yards without administering purification rites on entry and leaving; and respecting your elders.

The example below presents the issues that arise from a lack of understanding of the concept of *marimé*. Nadia, a young Gaji supervisor, was known by one of the families in the *Sikavni* to be a talented artist (particularly drawing) with excellent craft skills. The decision to take on a non-Romani supervisor was made to address the issue of isolation and to ensure that the *Sikavni* children have opportunity to gain some of the

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[3] Older female children and female adults are required to wear skirts below knee length, as per traditional dress custom. Although it is not traditionally required of very young girls, it has been brought in as a dress code (uniform) for all students.

cultural capital so important in mainstream society they need to experience a classroom that reflects this society (Trueba & Bartolome 1997: 4). The families agreed to her appointment because none of the parents had similar talent. During the time she spent with the children, Nadia was to use the resources provided by the Open Access College (curriculum and some supplies) and the *Sikavni* would provide other materials needed. Excursions were taken to the local park to collect natural materials such as leaves to assist with drawing projects.

Nadia started in May 2001 and finished at the *Sikavni* in August 2001, her skills were superb and the children were enamoured of her, but within the three months of starting, her behaviour had created havoc within the school. The following incident related by a parent gives one example of this:

> When I was emptying Harry's pockets to wash his trousers, I found a phone number and a girl's name on a piece of paper. It looked kind of funny and I found out later that it had been xeroxed [photocopied]. When I asked him, he told me that it was nothing. I knew Harry was lying, his face showed it all, and this alarmed me. I asked more questions and kept getting evasive answers. In the end I took the number to the school and asked the teacher. Well, I expected a dateline thing [dating service] like on the late-night TV or a cute girl from a shop nearby, but I wasn't ready for the truth. I never rang the number, maybe I should have just to see who it was, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.
>
> (Nicole, Interview Q40, 28 May 2002)

As it turned out, Nadia thought that the children led very sheltered lives and that it was 'disgraceful to keep them away from other children', so she gave all the children a telephone number of a woman who could help them if they did not like the way their parents treated them (Harry, Interview Q22 28 September 2001). 'Children should be encouraged to stand up for their rights, you can't stop them' was her answer when

questioned (Nadia, Interview August 2001). Fear of reprisals against the *Sikavni* that kept the community from sacking her. Susan expressed her fear that Nadia 'would tell the authorities that she was mistreating her children:

> She made it sound like we were locking the kids in the cupboard, we felt so mean. What could we do? I mean we could sack her, but what she would say about us taking away their rights. We felt like we had lost control. The very first time we let an outsider in, look what happened. How could we tell the other parents? So we kept quiet, but we watched her very closely, or so we thought. After she was eventually sacked, we found out more horror stories than we thought possible in such a short time. We thought it was bad, it got worse.
>
> There was a fight between two of the boys and afterwards, Nadia told them that they had to tell the truth to each other all the time, no matter what. Even after an interview with her to find out why she insisted so strongly, it was creepy, it was like because we were 'Gypsies' and you know how we lie all the time, we probably taught the kids.
>
> We couldn't say anything because it sounded like an honourable concept until it got out of control. Two of the boys were arguing 'telling the truth' but the problem with that was that when they ran out of 'truths', one of the boys made up a story. Well, this started as an argument amongst two children that spread to the rest of the children with family against family. Then it spread to the adults, it was only because of the closeness of the community here that we managed to stop it before it went on to an all-out war.
>
> (Susan, Interview Q7, 29 August 2001)

An insignificant argument between two boys turned into a fight. It progressed from name-calling to a family feud that had the potential to cause irreparable damage to relationships not just amongst the children but among the parents as well. It threatened to bring about the end of the *Sikavni*.

After she left, we found out that she had also thought it necessary to instruct the children about the 'real world', the one in which good things did not always happen. The one in which car crashes did not just kill people, but left them horribly maimed

(with graphic details); the one in which girls had sex before they were married (at the age of twelve) and had a baby, with a frank and full discussion about the process of giving birth. Whilst in isolation, none of these examples is an entirely inappropriate lesson for children to learn, this was not the role of an art and craft teacher.

The incident that resulted in the termination of her services was the day one of the parents discovered that she had taken the children to the local cemetery to get ideas for drawing their own headstone. It took three days for one of the children to admit that she was too scared to go back to the cemetery and she told her parents. When asked why we had not been told about this earlier the honest reply was:

> Well, Michael told Nadia he was scared and she just said 'don't be silly, they're only dead people like you and me' and then she told us what happens when you die, how either they burn you or you rot and all your skin falls off and you end up just a skeleton until that turns to dust. That bit even scared me. Michael started to cry and some of the girls went into the main room so they couldn't hear any more.
>
> I told Nadia that my mum and dad wouldn't like us going there and I told her why, you know, our days that we have and all that stuff but she said that was all just superstitious mumbo-jumbo. She asked us was it fun and most of us thought it was, so we said yes. She said for us not to tell our parents because they wouldn't let us go back, so we didn't.
>
> (John, Interview Q44, 9 June 2002)

This deception represented a complete double standard about 'telling the truth'. Forcing the children to lie to their parents as well as disparaging the cultural beliefs of the community whose children had been entrusted to her care. In short, Nadia was the epitome of why these parents felt that they could not send their children to a regular school, or integrate into mainstream culture.

The experience with Nadia illustrates the power and control teachers wield over children. A complex set of interrelated variables influence teachers' philosophies including their personal learning experiences; their knowledge and beliefs about learning, children, society, and the future; their own cognitive style; their socioeconomic cultural background; their teacher training; and government policies and practices (Eckermann 1994: 40). It is the interaction of these variables that determine:

> ... the teacher's perceptions of children, how children should learn, why and what children should learn, i.e. in what kind of society and future they will participate. Such knowledge and beliefs about children and their capabilities, in turn, have a direct bearing on how teachers function in the classroom.
>
> (Eckermann 1994: 41)

Eckermann (1994: 40-41) links this theory to a stereotypical view of the attributes of teachers as being '... monocultural, monolingual, and middle class in orientation ... even if they do not originate from the middle class, they adhere to the values and ideals which are supposed to characterise this group'. Whilst this is certainly not applicable to all teachers, it encapsulates many of Nadia's attitudes and the difficulties the Romani community faced during her time with the *Sikavni*.

Nadia was replaced by an older non-Romani woman (not so skilled but more suitable) for one afternoon each week. An ex-teacher, Connie was given several 'lessons' in Romani traditions and cultural beliefs and agreed to maintain a professional relationship with the students. The art work was not so spectacular, but the children were happy and the parents relieved. 'Connie's been great, she's restored everyone's faith in the *Sikavni*' (Geoff, Interview Q24, 29 September 2001). Connie's session has continued with minimal fuss and it is still optional for all children to attend – some still do not.

Because the rules of *marimé* observed by the *Sikavni* are similar to, if not the same as those followed at home, the children are, for the most part, comfortable with these. Even *familia* that do not follow these rules exactly understand the reasons for their implementation in the *Sikavni* and are willing to comply. In fact, there is a phenomenon in Australia between some families that is an unspoken contest as to which *familia* follows Romani customs and traditions the most closely. Alliances and friendships between *familia* are often based on the extent of acknowledgement of these traditions.

There are other functional rules (as distinct from rules arising from *marimé*) pertaining to use of musical and other equipment and costumes, arrival and leaving times, taking reading and school books home and these are explained to parents and children on their first and subsequent visits. Security of the children is of paramount importance and visitors must always be signed in. Entry is not permitted (except of known children) without prior notification or at least clearance from a member of the *Kris*. There are two doors between the children and the street and both doors are kept locked at all times. There are also several unwritten rules about racist and prejudiced behaviour, bullying and other forms of intolerance including religious discrimination. This last is particularly important due to the diverse nature of religious beliefs that are followed by Roma. For example, the *Kris* is currently considering whether to ban the wearing of all religious insignia as was recently put forward for French Public Schools, no action has yet been taken. It is envisaged that in the future it may well be necessary to have these rules written and displayed, but for now, it is sufficient that they are observed.

ROLES, POLITICS AND INFORMAL POWER RELATIONSHIPS

Despite power and politics being linked to the hierarchy in an organisation, there have not been a lot of conflicts associated with power-plays within the *Sikavni* to date. Mostly conflicts have been related to an individual child's performance or behaviour. One of the dangers of parent involvement in running schools is their tendency to look after their child(ren) above all others at the expense of other children and there have been times when this has been true of the *Sikavni*. Any parent with an issue is welcomed at any time to speak their mind and to clarify rules or decisions of supervisors. That is not to say there have been no heated discussions, but these have generally been benign in nature. Possibly this is partly due to the roles with power being shared and not attaching a permanent title to any one person. There has not been as yet, an exclusion from the *Sikavni* for non-compliance with the rules and regulations specified here, with the notable exception of Nadia.

The roles of the key personnel involved in the running of the *Sikavni* are described below. When reading these duties, it is important to remember that as stated earlier, these titles are not allocated on the same basis as traditionally expected. Because of this anomaly, duties may not be performed by the same person each time as usually expected in a position description.

The hands-on administrative team of the *Sikavni* is currently composed of the Principal/Administrator and the Head Supervisor. This team is directed and supported in its decision making processes by the *Kris*.

The *Kris*

A *Kris* in its traditional meaning is equivalent to a Romani Court of Law. It is defined as 'an assembly which is called into being by the action of a plaintiff asking for justice against a defendant' (Acton 2003: 642). It is a term however, that has also been adopted by Romani political groups to ensure respect, even in Romani communities with no tradition of the *Kris* (Acton, Personal Communication, 5 January 2005. In this instance the definition of a *Kris* has been adapted to suit the needs of the community, to ensure that the proper respect due to decisions of a *Kris* is given. The *Kris* is not involved in the *Sikavni* per se, that is, it has responsibilities in a broad and overarching sense rather than in the day-to-day concerns. It is, however, the parent forum and all issues, grievances and ideas of new ventures are brought to the *Kris*. The roles and functions of the *Kris* include: overall responsibility for general direction and oversight of the *Sikavni*'s instructional and management functions; participating in the selection of the Head Supervisor and the Principal/Administrator; approving *Sikavni* purchases; handling conflicts/problems that can not be resolved at a lower level; and ensuring that the measures taken to safeguard the children whilst under the care of the *Sikavni* are appropriate for both physical and cultural safety.

Principal/Administrator

The Principal's role is not in teaching; it describes administrative functions and has responsibilities in ensuring the quality of the programme and liaising with government departments on an official basis. Some of the functions within the role of Principal/Administrator are always performed by the same person. The reason for this is that some of the liaison functions are quite diplomatic in terms of what can and cannot

be said. The seriousness of this issue was brought home after a radio broadcast in 2002 (see Chapter 7, p. 204) and since that date, this role was tightened and it was decided that responsibility for public representation of the *Sikavni* was not to be shared. The only exception to this was the liaison between the Head Supervisor, the Open Access College and the children in relation to school work only and this is because the personnel of the Open Access College are considered to be trusted people.

The roles and functions of the Principal/Administrator include:

- Serving as the liaison between the *Sikavni* and all government departments and other organisations;
- Ensuring the safety of the children whilst under the care of the *Sikavni*;
- Development, implementation and coordination of the *Sikavni* strategic plan;
- Implementation of general direction of all *Sikavni*'s instructional and management functions;
- Providing leadership and direction to the *Sikavni*;
- Supervising and evaluating *Sikavni* function;
- Working with Head Supervisor to ensure the appropriate level of school supervisors and the efficient and effective operation of the *Sikavni*;
- Providing leadership to Head Supervisor in the implementation of instructional assistance strategies and reporting of student progress;
- Writing and Implementing all *Kris* decisions and policies for the *Sikavni*;
- Ensuring that the measures taken to safeguard the children whilst under the care of the *Sikavni* are appropriate for both physical and cultural safety and are integrated into the policies and procedures for the *Sikavni*;

- Maintaining schedules and materials for all *Kris* meetings;
- Retrieving and compiling information from the *Sikavni*; and
- Designing and implementing professional learning activities for Head Supervisor re leadership and supervisor capabilities for their role

The role of the Principal/Administrator, described as 'retrieving and compiling information from the *Sikavni*' was introduced to describe the research function of this researcher. This description was necessary because even though most of the Romani people in our community understand that I will be writing about the *Sikavni* and their experiences, they fear research as another way to put them under a microscope and look for the aberrant ('green') gene that makes Romani people behave the way they do.[4]

Roles of the Head Supervisor

This role is often filled by parents and relatives of the children. The role of the Head Supervisor to 'act as a link between the Open Access College and the Open Access Children' was specified by the Open Access College. The same also applies to the role 'to guide, encourage and support the Open Access Children in developing independent learning skills enabling them to do the set tasks in the negotiated time'.

The roles and functions of the Head Supervisor include:

- Providing first line contact with parents;

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[4] For example: a genetic research project conducted by Kalaydjieva et al in 2001 caused great consternation amongst Australian Roma, all of whom had limited or no understanding of the true meaning and interpretation of the research. Kalaydjieva L et al (2001). Origins and divergence of the Roma (Gypsies). Am J Hum Genet 69, 1314-31

- Providing assistance to supervisors;
- Ensuring the safety of the children whilst under the care of the *Sikavni*;
- Timetable Management;
- Working with Principal/Administrator to ensure the appropriate level of supervisors and the efficient and effective operation of the *Sikavni*;
- Acting as a link between the Open Access College and the Open Access Children in relation to school work only; and
- Guiding, encouraging and supporting the Open Access Children in developing independent learning skills enabling them to do the set tasks in the negotiated time.

Roles of the Supervisors

The role of the Supervisors is 'to guide, encourage and support the Open Access Children in developing independent learning skills enabling them to do the set tasks in the negotiated time'. Another vital role of the supervisors is in teaching Romani culture, music and dance.

Role of the Community Leaders in the *Sikavni*

Community leaders are generally Roma whose skills in being able to liaise both between the different families and government departments are heavily utilised. For the purposes of the proposal for a non-government school, a modern version of the old-fashioned *Kris* was formed. Although a *Kris* is usually a gathering of men at which innocence or guilt and subsequent punishment is meted out, in the case of the *Sikavni* it

was not a case of guilt or innocence, but rather is a forum to assist the community to reach mutual decisions without recrimination.

The community leaders involved in the *Kris* are not all well educated (in fact some have never been to school at all). They were not chosen for their education, but rather their community-power which depends on neither their wealth nor their education. Community-power is more based on the amount of leverage the person is able to exert on others in the community. It is always related to the ability to be outspoken and will generally be shown by the dominant member of the local community or *familia* (Morrow 1998: 147). The other main difference between this *Kris* and those often reported in other research was the presence of several women. It was felt by many that women needed to be present at all meetings for a number of reasons: some of the children attending the *Sikavni* were their children; they would be involved as supervisors; they were 'movers and shakers' and could make things happen; and they 'could talk men into doing things they didn't really want to do':

> To be honest, I thought it was a damn fool idea if ever I heard one, but I have to say I've changed my mind now even if I'm embarrassed to admit it. I put up a good fight against starting this *Sikavni*, but the girls talked me into it. Now we've got it, the kids love it, I love it and I think its doing us all some good. Hey, look it gets my kids up and out of bed every day - except Sunday and they come home tired but happy. They always want to go back tomorrow. It's a pity this *Sikavni* wasn't around when we were kids, think how different things could be now. I mean, I've had a good life, but the number of times I've been ripped off because I can't read is getting awful big.
>
> (David, Interview Q6, 28 August 2001)

The *Kris* is responsible for the initial decision-making processes. Because of the impact of the *Sikavni* on the community in the aftermath of the journalist's article, the *Kris* was

the body that had the power to say continue or not. The community was therefore involved in the ground-breaking decisions that made the *Sikavni* possible, but they are not involved in the general running or day-to-day issues that arise. The *Kris* is not so active now as initially, but the members still meet on an irregular basis.

The Role of Parents in the *Sikavni*

From the early 1900s until the 1970s, parents and communities were almost excluded from the mainstream education process. Decision-making processes were centralised and education was something that happened only in the classroom with little interference from outside sources. Since the 1970s, parents and communities have been encouraged to become more involved, most notably though the Karmel Report (1973), but this has been achieved to a varying degree in different schools (Evers and Chapman 1995: 254). The same can be said of the *Sikavni* and this is an issue of concern to the *Kris* as the future of the *Sikavni* is dependent on the goodwill and support of its parents. Without their support, there would be no children enrolled in the *Sikavni* and it would not exist. The concern then is that some parents are involved because they have to be, not because they want to be, and their hearts' desire is to take their children away. These parents remain vocal in the *Kris* against the *Sikavni* and all that it stands for. The arguments are often heated about the dangers of literacy and education in Gajé ways leading to assimilation of the Romani people and loss of the culture.

The degree of parental involvement in the *Sikavni* also varies widely depending on which families are in town at any given time, but all parents are encouraged to take on as much of a participative role as they would like. One parent held the head supervisor

role for several months as it was felt that her participation would strengthen her ties with the *Sikavni*. This participation, it was hoped would encourage higher participation rates of her children. The trial was considered by all to be quite successful and although all other parents are offered the same experience, most choose to decline.

Parents are able to choose the extra activities in which their children will participate and how far into the mainstream curriculum they would like their children to venture. The subjects English, Mathematics and Science & Technology are strictly non-negotiable. Most choose to also study society and environment, but few children are permitted to study health & physical education for fear of sex education.[5] Many of the children had previously learned other languages and the Open Access College teaches Indonesian, French, German and Spanish. The *Sikavni* has been putting together a *Romanes* language programme which satisfies the Language Other Than English (LOTE) component of the curriculum. There has been a teaching guide and a simple game developed, but the *Sikavni* is in need of a standardised text by which children can be taught. No doubt other communities are experiencing similar difficulties in finding suitable texts. The resources so far developed have utilised the new International dialect that was recently developed by several Romani linguists. Although it has created some minor difficulties with the different dialects, the children's exploration of these differences has served to heighten their interest in learning Romanes.

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5 In Romani tradition, fathers talk to the sons and are held responsible for their sex education and their attitudes towards women. Mothers are responsible for their daughters, to prepare them for their wedding day and its associated rituals.

Discussion of the advantages and limitations of parental involvement as discussed by Lunenburg and Ornstein (2004: 232) apply also to the Romani community. The most important reason for encouraging parent participation in the *Sikavni* is that it is the parents that we are trying to reach, it is their attitudes and beliefs that will most influence a child's desire to attend the *Sikavni*, or even the local school. The *Sikavni* is also in great need of assistance in relation to supervisors and assistants, whether literate or not. With greater parental involvement will come improved child access to the services of the *Sikavni*. Those parents who have become involved report that they have benefited from the experience:

> It was great, I spent a week in the *Sikavni*, working with all the kids, we were doing a holiday programme and visited the museum and the art gallery. You know, I've never been to the art gallery before. I can see now why Jack likes to come here so much.
>
> (Nicole, Interview Q40, 28 May 2002)

The only tangible disadvantage for the *Sikavni* is that involvement of parents must include all parents, including those who are critical of the process. There are some parents who remain disenfranchised from schooling, despite attempts to be inclusive of all parents. These parents choose to have no idea in which subjects their children are enrolled and have expressed no desire to have an understanding of their education. It is sufficient for these parents to know that their children are safe, both physically and culturally, during times when they must attend the *Sikavni*.

There are few academics associated with the *Sikavni* and although I am one, I keep my education out of sight most of the time, except when asked directly for an opinion, particularly if it will help to end a discussion. This has the added effect of not being

intimidating to parents with little formal education. As the parents feel equal to the supervisors and administrative personnel there are very few hierarchical disputes and concerns are discussed openly or in private.

INDIVIDUALS (COGNITION AND MOTIVATION)

Although values both written and unwritten, are not physical structures that can be easily identified and understood, they are an integral component of the curriculum and symbolic make-up of any school or environment. Education and its institutions have a responsibility to ensure that the children entrusted to its care both understand and follow a set of core values on which they can model their behaviour (Lunenburg and Ornstein 2004: 524). These core values are determined by the cultural heritage of the society of which they are a member. Therefore the *Sikavni* has a role in ensuring transmission of the values of two societies.

The question most frequently asked of the administrator, parents and assistants of the *Sikavni* has been 'What are you trying to achieve?' This is the same question that the community asked itself constantly throughout the genesis and subsequent development of the *Sikavni.* The answer to this question is two-sided in nature and this has characterised the *Sikavni.* The answer from the perspective of a parent is 'literacy for our children' (Josie, Interview Q4, 17 March 2000). The response from the perspective of researcher is answered both through this research and that of Morrow (1998). It is the provision of culturally appropriate schooling that also provides quality learning outcomes for Romani children in Australia. The original research questions posed in 1995, at the very beginning of the journey that lead to the creation of the *Sikavni*, were strictly focused on the educational needs of the Romani people in Australia. It was the

path of that research with its results and recommendations that generated the original notion of the *Sikavni.* Morrow's recommendation that found the most favour with the Romani community was the use of the government's distance education system, or at least a distance education school run on similar lines:

> There was really only one recommendation that found universal favour with the Rom, that is, setting up a system parallel to open access which allows progression at a rate commensurate with their abilities. The fact that we found even one solution was encouraging as it suggested that the issue was not so much one of a lack of literacy skills, but rather incompatibility of the school system as it currently stands.
>
> (Morrow 1998: 224)

Thus, the outcomes of Morrow's research (1998) provided the foundation of the *Sikavni* and have continued to underpin the philosophies of the *Sikavni*. Those members of the Romani community involved in the development of the *Sikavni* have also been mindful of the questions asked at the beginning of this research, as they are focused on the future of education of Romani children in Australia. These questions necessitated looking at the options that had been trialled internationally and assessing their likely success or failure in their own environment and extrapolating this to the Australian environment. Visiting Romani schools in Europe in 2003 also put the Australian endeavours in a different light as they were interpreted through the eyes of other Roma, researchers and Romani educators, investigating whether one model or another would be more suitable in Australia. Giving explanation of the *Sikavni*, its structure and its function and receiving feedback enabled a more critical appraisal of Australian efforts.

The research questions guiding the study also necessitated looking at different modes of delivery and issues involved in quality of learning outcomes for the children who would

be enrolled in the *Sikavni*. With these questions in mind this research has been a tool for improvement, one that has been used to foster changes in Romani society whilst, at the same time, generating knowledge about the Romani world view. The case study methodology and associated ethnographic techniques enabled this research to focus on problems or issues that have arisen from practical concerns associated with the *Sikavni* rather than purely theoretical considerations.

Maintenance of Culture and Heritage

The mainstream values described by Lunenburg and Ornstein (2004: 524) are those that engender national pride, personal commitment, self-confidence and social responsibility. Additional to these mainstream values, but not in place of them, are those that come from the children's cultural heritage. It is these values that are first and foremost in the minds of the *Kris* and administrative team of the *Sikavni*. The Romani community through the *Kris* determines those values that are non-negotiable and those that can be replaced. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) confirms its support of cultural diversity and cultural rights through Article 5 of the Declaration which states that:

> Cultural rights are an integral part of human rights, which are universal, indivisible and inter-dependent. The flourishing of creative diversity requires the full implementation of cultural rights as defined in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in Articles 13 and 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. All persons have therefore the right to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue; all persons are entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity; and all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices, subject to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.
>
> (UNESCO 2001: 13)

Cultural diversity refers to festive events; rites and beliefs; music and song; the performing arts; culinary traditions; language; and oral traditions. One of the most important things a Romani parent will pass on to their children is a knowledge and understanding of their Romani heritage, including the language, history and culture, to enable them to live fulfilling lives within the Romani tradition. The *Sikavni* is assisting them to do this while attaining the knowledge, skills and values that will enable them to participate effectively in Australia's culturally diverse community. The Mission Statement of the *Sikavni* is to:

- provide a physical environment that reflects the perspectives, values and culture of Romani students and people;
- work with the Romani organisations to provide cultural, intellectual, and emotional support to all Romani students and the larger Romani community;
- support and challenge students interested in furthering their education regardless of age;
- be an integral part of the Romani Communities' effort to provide multicultural education for all Roma; and
- to provide information to the wider education community on Romani traditions, language and culture.

(Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language 2000)

In keeping with its mission statement, the *Sikavni* has agreed to work with the *Kris* and the local and national community on the following aspects of maintaining heritage and cultural traditions:

- Collaboration with local Roma to create a sense of ownership of the *Sikavni*;
- Providing information to ensure a greater understanding and respect for the Romani culture; and
- Developing community-based activities, including a language programme and (if possible) a festival to which the *Sikavni* children are a major contributor.

(*Kris* Meeting, 2 March 2000)

The rules of the *Sikavni* with regard to many issues wherever possible take on the role of ensuring that the children are aware of their culture and heritage and the responsibility they share in ensuring its future. The challenge has been to express these traditions as tangible possessions that can be incorporated into the *Sikavni*, rather than just concepts that accompany life.

CULTURE (SHARED ORIENTATIONS OF THE INDIVIDUALS)

Culture of the *Sikavni*

Schwartz and Davis (1981: 33 quoted in Hoy 1990: 156) define culture as 'a pattern of beliefs and expectations shared by the organization's members that produces norms that powerfully shape the behavior of individuals or groups in organizations.' As is typical of mainstream schools (both public and private) the *Sikavni*'s culture is reflective of the culture of the community it serves and, in the case of the *Sikavni,* this is the Romani community. Although this was a deliberate strategy to engage community support for the *Sikavni* however, the danger of being too ethnocentric is that:

> Students who are born and socialized within the mainstream culture of a society rarely have an opportunity to identify, question, and challenge their cultural assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives because the school culture usually reinforces those that they learn at home and in their communities.
>
> Consequently, mainstream Americans have few opportunities to become free of cultural assumptions and perspectives that are monocultural, that devalue [other] cultures, and that stereotype people of color and people who are poor, or who are victimized in other ways. These mainstream Americans often have an inability to function effectively within other American cultures, and lack the ability and motivation to experience and benefit from cross-cultural participation and relationships.
>
> (Banks 1996: 80)

The risk that the *Sikavni* will lose sight of this is unlikely in its current form as one of its main aims is that it produces young adults able to cope in mainstream society:

> Aim: to develop in all children the acquisition of social skills which enable them to function effectively and harmoniously in Australia's multicultural society and the adaptability to live effectively in any social environment.
>
> (Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language 2001: 2)

As an integral component of the Mission Statement of the *Sikavni*, the culture of the *Sikavni* is promoted to all participants as being Romani-focussed but promoting an understanding and tolerance of mainstream society.

Climate of the *Sikavni*

Hoy and Miskel (2001: 190) describe the organisational climate as a tool to 'capture the general feel or atmosphere of schools'. It describes the internal set of characteristics that distinguish one school from another and influence the behaviour of each school's members. This analysis will rely on the descriptors of climate as proposed by Schmuck and Schmuck (1974: 4). This requires observation of group behaviours and interactions between individuals in the *Sikavni*. These interactions are evaluated in terms of four characteristics of group processes: influence, attraction, norms and communication.

Influence. The climate of the *Sikavni* could be broadly described as humanistic, that is, one in which the children 'learn through cooperative interaction and experience' (Hoy & Miskel 2001: 205). This is particularly so in many instances as the supervisor assisting the children is simultaneously learning with the child.

Relationships within the *Sikavni* reflect those in the community and are therefore defined by Romani tradition. The relationships between the children and the supervisors are generally quite collaborative. The relationships between the Head Supervisor or the *Kris* and the children are more dominative, however there are generally only short periods of time when this is apparent. Part of this dominative behaviour comes from the Romani tradition that demands that positions of authority are earned rather than given. Overarching and significant decisions are made by the *Kris* to ensure general consensus and day-to-day decisions are made by the person affected. For example, the children although supervised choose to a large extent the speed and what open access school work they will complete. They are guided in these decisions by their Open Access College teachers who encourage rather than force completion of work.

Attraction. There are strong bonds connecting the children at the *Sikavni* and this is characterised by the close personal relationships that have developed between them. The friendship patterns vary depending on the activity being undertaken, although during the interviews and periods of observation, there were no children or supervisors who were deliberately isolated by the whole group. There appear to be few cliques of children, although the small size of the group and the variable number of children attending affects this. There are generally two identifiable groupings that occur. The first are when some children were involved in one activity and others in another, for example, the children who attend regularly tend to congregate to complete their school work. The other grouping is according to age such that when completing open access school work the children tend to form two groups – one of the 'younger children' (ages four to about seven years) and the other the 'older children' (ages from about eight years and over).

The 'middle aged children', those aged about seven to eight years tend to drift between groups depending on the activities and discussions within workgroups. The children may also work together in family units and this is usually dependant on the activity. For example, if a work group is looking at a particular vocational task that one family specialises in, then the children will gravitate towards that group.

Norms. The *Sikavni* is run along humanistic control lines, in that the children are expected to be self-disciplined rather than controlled by a supervisor and this starts on entry to the *Sikavni*. This method of control works well where the supervisor is someone else's parent/brother/sister. Sometimes where it is a relative, a child will 'act out' and try to encourage others to join in. Some of the supervisors have been quite ingenious in their control methods. The discipline policy is based on the principles of the need for the safety of individual children and the group, the rights of children to learn and experience success, the right to remain at the *Sikavni* (hopefully by choice and with parental support) and be enrolled with the Open Access College whilst enjoying their education. Respect for the environment (inside the *Sikavni* and out) is also a requirement and is strictly enforced, due in no small part to the need to ensure the security and protection of the collection of musical instruments, costumes and other possessions of the *Sikavni*.

Suspension and expulsion of children from the *Sikavni* are available options should all other avenues fail, but to date the requirement for such action has not been activated. As a component of the *Sikavni* policies, suspension may be for a period of one day to one week. In reality, unless desperate measures were required, such action would not be

taken because the only reason for the operation of the *Sikavni* is to encourage participation in education, not to turn children away. The discipline policy allows for the matter to be brought before the *Kris* and all parties to be heard prior to any action being taken. With regard to the issue of corporal punishment of children, Stefaniak (1997) reported in Hansard that:

> ...registration standards for non-government schools require each school to have a comprehensive behaviour management policy. The policy should state as a minimum that corporal punishment is a last resort option and that full written records must be kept of any instance where it is used. A scan of national policies reveals that corporal punishment is banned in government schools in all States and Territories, with the exception of Tasmania and the Northern Territory. The banning of corporal punishment in government schools in South Australia dates back to 1982. Legislation outlawing corporal punishment was passed in New South Wales in 1995. No other Australian jurisdiction has actually legislated against corporal punishment. However, it has been outlawed in Victoria since 1983 and in Western Australia since 1987, and has been systematically phased out from the Queensland education system since 1992. So, whilst there is very little legislation in relation to this, in practice, certainly since the 1980s, in most instances, it has been a non-issue and not an option considered for addressing behavioural problems in schools.
>
> (Stefaniak quoted in Hansard 1997: 1373)

In line with this, the *Sikavni* has a policy on behaviour management and as a component of that policy, corporal punishment is neither condoned nor permitted in the *Sikavni*, by parents or any other adult (or child).

As described by Jackson (1968 quoted in Haller and Strike 1986: 91), the degree to which conformity to rules is required in mainstream schools correlates directly to the number of children under the care of a single (adult) figure of authority. In the *Sikavni* where older sisters (and sometimes) brothers are encouraged to attend, the ratio of children to authority figure is much lower than in mainstream schools. This in turn

means that children needing assistance are generally not required to wait for long periods of time, again a major factor in student control. Open access teachers are also a telephone call away, should any problem be too much for the child or the supervisor.

Communication. Communication within the *Sikavni* is fairly open and appears not to be uni-directional. There are only two aspects of communication that could be described as closed. The first is the formal communication between the *Sikavni* and the Open Access College in regard to administrative matters. The second is communication regarding the decisions of the *Kris*. As these are considered to be community decisions, once made, they are generally only negotiable through the next *Kris* meeting. The children are encouraged to express their feelings within boundaries of respect and community relationships. Examples of communication within the *Sikavni* are further explored in Chapter 9.

SUMMARY

This chapter has analysed the structural and cultural characteristics of the *Sikavni*. It has done this by endeavouring to apply conventional closed and open system theories to an unconventional institution. Initially run on the goodwill of Roma willing to donate their time and effort unstintingly, in rooms borrowed from the business of one of the families involved, the *Sikavni* will, as it develops, need to redefine its identity, structure, financial resourcing and its style of governance as more children come under its umbrella. The acuteness of this need is lessened as the Open Access College in consultation with the teachers and the Principal control the actual content of much of the curriculum. However, to achieve a lasting identity, the school administrator will need to

take heed of the many projects particularly in the United States, but also in Europe, that have failed precipitously.

It is outside the scope of this study to undertake a complete organisational analysis and much of the evidence for the statements about the climate and culture of the *Sikavni* has relied on the researcher's understanding and perspective as an insider. Chapter 9 analyses the effectiveness and quality of the *Sikavni* based on the following theory that:

> ... school climate is often identified with the Edmonds' (1979) effective schools model in which he argued that strong administrative leadership, high performance expectations, a safe and orderly environment, an emphasis on basic skills, and a system of monitoring student progress constitute a school climate that promotes academic achievement.
>
> (Hoy 1990: 150)

Some of the findings presented here are, therefore made more explicit in the following chapter which examines more closely the experiences of the children and the community in the *Sikavni.*

Chapter 9

Quality and Effectiveness of the Sikavni

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the research question related to assuring the quality of schooling options for Romani children in the Australian context. In its investigation of quality in the *Sikavni*, this chapter presents data gathered from participant observation, life experience of participants and interviews with informants in their natural setting. It considers the effects of education in this *Sikavni* on the *familia* of the participants and the wider community. It also describes some of the experiences of children in the *Sikavni*. There has been no analysis of gender differences between children in the *Sikavni*. In part this is because in Romani society, girls and boys under the age of 12 are perceived and treated alike, but also because it is outside the scope of this study to investigate the influence of gender on perceptions of quality.

Findings reported in this chapter about the *Sikavni* come from the 'in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon' (Orum, Feagin & Sjoberg 1991: 2). The analysis has relied on several data sources including a lifetime of being a complete participant in the community, nine

years as a participant observer, four years of collecting data and eighteen months of key participant interviews.

DEFINING QUALITY IN EDUCATION AND SCHOOLING

The most widely used generic definition of quality (Hoy & Miskel 2001: 308) is 'the extent to which a product or service meets or exceeds customer or client expectations'. This definition, whilst being an adequate starting point, provides no indicators by which measurement of quality can be undertaken. Applying this definition to education and schooling causes even more difficulties as it depends on subjective judgements as to appropriate expectations or needs. In 1985, Peter Karmel noted that the interpretation of the statement 'quality of education' was difficult as it was a 'complex and diffuse concept' (1985 quoted in Woods 1998: 6). In 1995, some ten years later, Karmel (1995 quoted in Woods 1998: 6) stated 'that while everyone recognises 'quality' when they see it, they cannot or will not define it'. It is my belief that modern society with its propensity for rapidly changing social, economic and cultural conditions will lead to issues of quality improvement and quality management becoming even more ambiguous and therefore even more important to schools. Concurrent strategies to measure and guarantee this quality will become a fundamental component of each school's philosophy (Logan & Sachs 1997: 247).

For many researchers such as Argyris & Schon 1974 and Lee, Bryk & Smith 1993, the concept of quality in education and schooling has been one reflecting a bureaucratic perspective, ignoring to a large extent the aspect of the 'school as a community with

shared goals and values' (Lee, Bryk & Smith 1993 cited in Silins & Murray-Harvey 1995: para 4). This attitude can be seen throughout school effectiveness research:

> ...much school effectiveness research continues to employ narrow measures of student achievement (Mortimore 1992; Reynolds 1992; Sammons 1996) as convenient measures of schools' performance. The research to date has concentrated on identifying the internal and external characteristics of schools that are relevant to establishing, developing and sustaining "effective schools" defined as schools where students achieve improved subject grades.
>
> (Silins & Murray-Harvey 1998: para 4)

Reeves and Bednar (1994 cited in Woods 1998: 6) argue that the 'concept of quality is so broad and includes so many components' that a single definition could not encompass every characteristic. Following this argument, it is not possible to reduce the measurement of quality and effectiveness of a school to one criterion such as school output; even if that assessment measures the literacy and numeracy skills of every school child in Australia.

A popular definition of school effectiveness (Scheerens 2000: 18) is the level of performance (outputs) of the organisational unit, the 'school'. One of the major difficulties with the measurement of the efficiency of schools is that not all characteristics of effectiveness will work in the same way in all schools and this is particularly evident in the *Sikavni* (Adewuji 2002: 264). The research of Stoll and Fink (1999: 27 quoted in Carney 2003: 88) gives a definition of an effective school as one in which the students progress further than expected given the school's intake. That is, effectiveness is further defined as the value added by a school in addition to each student's prior attainment or background factors (Carney 2003: 88).

School effectiveness as an issue was born in the United States in the late 1960s in response to research and the controversial "Coleman Report" (Coleman *et al* 1966). Coleman reported that the overwhelming influence of family characteristics and social class left no room for influence by schools and concluded that 'schools can't make a difference as compared to family background and the social characteristics of the student body' (Ravitch 1993: 140). This was interpreted as no matter the culture or philosophy of a school, 'the different ways of the organisation and working of schools and teaching had little bearing on academic success' (Ministerio de Educatión, Cultura y Deporte 2003). Since this time, conceptions of effectiveness have broadened from pure outcomes to an evaluation of progress and much of the research prompted by the Coleman Report has since shown Coleman's conclusions to be incorrect.

The 'second wave' of researchers (after the Coleman Report) 'emphasized the process rather than the input correlates with school output, as well as more in-depth investigation of a relatively small sample of schools' (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker 1979 in Gaziel 1997: 310) and those following found that there were five factors that seemed to be linked closely to school effectiveness, these being 'strong educational leadership, high expectations of student achievement, emphasis on basic skills, a safe and orderly climate and frequent evaluations of pupil progress' (Brookover *et al.* 1979; Edmonds 1979; Mortimore *et al.* 1988; Reynolds et al. 1994 quoted in Ministerio de Educatión 2003). Additionally, it has been found that effective schools 'take advantage of the languages known by the students and recognize their cultural background' (Brisk 1998: 66).

These descriptors remain current, some ten years later Lunenburg and Ornstein (2004: 409) describe the qualities of effective schools as those with a powerful and long-term commitment to bringing about 'substantial, widespread and enduring gains' to student performance. They state that the effectiveness of the whole school will determine the success in the classroom and use Edmonds' descriptors as a basis to describe an effective school as one in which there is:

- A safe and orderly environment that is not oppressive and is conducive to teaching and learning;
- A clear school mission though which the staff shares a commitment to instructional goals, priorities, assessment procedures and accountability;
- Instructional leadership by a Principal who understands and applies the characteristics of instructional effectiveness;
- A climate of high expectations in which the staff demonstrates that all students can attain mastery of basic skills;
- High time on task brought about when a high percentage of students' time is spent 'engaged' in planned activities to master basic skills;
- Frequent monitoring of student progress, using the results to improve individual performance and the instructional programme.

(Edmonds 1982: 40 quoted in Lunenburg and Ornstein 2004: 409)

It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate each of these indicators in depth. The *Sikavni* shares the attaining of these goals with the Open Access College because it does not formally encompass the teaching and learning component of schooling. Thus, it assists the Open Access College to attain these goals of school effectiveness.

Hoy and Miskel (2001: 308) state that 'depending on your perspective, models of quality either have begun to replace or add to theories of organizational effectiveness'. Other researchers such as Karmel (1995 quoted in Woods 1998: 6) consider two discrete branches - 'quality as excellence' and 'quality as effectiveness'. A narrow analysis of effectiveness based on quantitative figures of enrolled children was not

possible because it would have given an inaccurate representation of the *Sikavni*. The *Sikavni* provides support to many children through cultural activities and functions as in addition to those children enrolled in the Open Access School and as will be evidenced throughout the ensuing discussion, this broader focus is another criterion of quality as excellence. The indicators of quality used in this discussion are not presented as a succinct definition of quality, but rather are an investigation into the concept of 'quality as effectiveness'.

ANALYSING THE QUALITY OF THE *SIKAVNI* THROUGH CRITERIA OF EFFECTIVENESS

Several examples of the use of indicators of the quality of schools and education were investigated for appropriateness in evaluating the effectiveness of the *Sikavni* (MacBeath, Meuret & Schratz 1997; Lambeth Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership 2002; Cuttance 1996; MCEETYA 2000). These indicators are qualitative in nature, defining the nature of quality rather than quantifying its outcomes in measurable standardized tests (Karmel 1995 quoted in Woods 1998: 6). The ten key dimensions of quality schooling specified by Cuttance (1996) in the Australian National Quality Schooling Framework encompass the following criteria: Beliefs and understanding; Teaching and learning – incorporating assessment and reporting issues, teacher professional development, intervention and special assistance; Management – leadership, school and classroom organisation; and Community – partnerships. The above criteria have been incorporated into this discourse however the terminology used to describe the indicators of quality in this thesis have been taken mainly from the criteria identified by the Lambeth Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (2002) and adapted to both a broader and more Australian contextualised framework

utilising several other researchers (MacBeath, Meuret & Schratz 1997; National Quality Schooling Framework 1996; MCEETYA 2000). The criteria applied here are:

- Management and organisation;
- teaching and learning;
- the physical environment;
- social experience; and
- contribution to community.

The contribution of the management/organisational criteria towards quality and effectiveness was covered in Chapter 8, the organisational analysis of the *Sikavni*. The remaining criteria are covered in the pages following.

Teaching & Learning

Evidence of quality in teaching and learning is found though investigation of: performance (outputs); academic achievement of *Sikavni* children; the extent to which the 'Curriculum' Goals are met; the paths followed by the children after they leave the *Sikavni* (pupil destinations); support for learning difficulties; efficient use of time; and the learning culture of the *Sikavni*. The primary aim of the *Sikavni* with regard to teaching and learning is to assist students develop their maximum potential and to encourage natural intellectual curiosity. The aims listed below are pursued in partnership with the Open Access College:

- to facilitate each child's ability to communicate more effectively and appropriately by developing the skills of verbal communication, literacy and artistic expression
- to develop an understanding of fundamental ideas of number, measurement and mathematical relationships, a knowledge of the language of maths and skill in computation and problem solving
- to develop inquiry and research skills and encourage good working habits

- to train memory skills
- to provide a secure learning environment in which learning is a pleasure
- to give each child a feeling of achievement in her or his work
- to extend the children's overall knowledge

(Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language 2001: 1)[1]

It is important to note here that these aims are only shared with parents who request to see them. Most parents have neither understanding nor desire to understand these aims. The teaching of the mainstream curriculum at the *Sikavni* is performed by the Open Access College. The role of the *Sikavni* in this area is to supervise the children in the same manner as a parent or guardian at home. This analysis is therefore, necessarily incomplete, because it relies solely on the evidence provided by the supervisors and children in the *Sikavni*.

The last point of Edmonds' (1982: 40 quoted in Lunenburg and Ornstein 2004: 409) descriptors of an effective school 'frequent monitoring of student progress, using the results to improve individual performance and the instructional programme', is performed by the Open Access College. The learning goals (or outputs) expected from the children are clear and understood by the students and supervisors. Where confusion or difficulties are perceived, they are discussed with the Head Supervisor and appropriate action is taken in consultation with the Open Access College. Qualitatively, looking at educational attainment of the students enrolled with the Open Access College however, their collective and individual scholastic achievements (measured by

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[1] The 'Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language Policy Statement: Mission Statement was adapted from the Islamic School Curriculum and Policy Statement kindly donated to the *Sikavni* in 1999.

progression through successive academic years) speak to the effectiveness of the *Sikavni*-Open Access College partnership. This is not based so much on the outstanding quality of the students as it is on the fact that the students progress further than expected given the school's intake'. Without the *Sikavni*, some of these students would receive very little schooling in the mainstream education system and most would been likely to continue without successful acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills.

The *Sikavni* contributes to all the components of the effective school described by Edmonds (1982: 40 quoted in Lunenburg and Ornstein 2004: 409). It provides an environment that is considered safe not only by the children but also by their parents. The environment is generally orderly but not always quiet, it is not oppressive and is conducive to learning. The *Sikavni* mission statement is the instrument through which commitment to the children is demonstrated to the community, supervisors, parents and children. The *Sikavni* Mission Statement can be seen in Appendix 7. Evidence of the effectiveness of the *Sikavni* also comes from two of the *Sikavni* children who, with their parents' permission in 2002, sat for the state literacy test for Grades Three and Five. The children not only passed, but one of their results was within the top ten per cent of the state. Their children's *familia* were told of the results and although they could tell whomever they wanted, they chose to tell no-one as they had told no-one the children were participating in the first instance. This example is one of the few tangible pieces of evidence to prove that this particular form of alternative education is working.

Another less easily quantifiable example comes from Cecile who left the *Sikavni* when her parents moved interstate. On arrival in Perth, she was placed in a mainstream school situated on the outskirts of the city in a poorer socio-economic area. On initial

assessment to determine her grade, Cecile was found to have many learning difficulties and the school had difficulty in placing her in the appropriate grade for age. At the *Sikavni* she had been working at a level that suited her ability rather than her age. In this new school, she was struggling even with the assistance of remedial classes. Cecile had attended the *Sikavni* irregularly for about eight months before her family left. The *Sikavni* was the fifth school that she had attended due to the travel movements of her family. The local school diagnosed Attention Deficit Disorder and said that Cecile would need medication (Ritalin®) in order to continue at the school as her inability to sit through even one class and her destructive behaviour was too disruptive to her classmates. At the *Sikavni,* observation had shown that Cecile could sit for nearly two hours working on drawing or sewing, content and happy to try her hand at maths, English or science. She is now taking Ritalin and goes to school about two or three days a week (Margaret, Interview Q34, 3 February 2002).

Issues dealing with 'instructional goals, priorities, assessment procedures and accountability' are usually left in the capable hands of the Open Access College. However, all parents are consulted before assessment of any child occurs. The Open Access College understands and applies the characteristics of instructional effectiveness even though this role would normally be undertaken by the 'School' Principal; in this case, it is the Principal of the Open Access College. The *Sikavni* is founded on the belief that all Romani children can attain mastery of much more than simple literacy skills; it is only the way in which these skills are attained that changes. Taking into consideration the wide variety of reasons for which the children are enrolled in the Open Access College, the parents overall appear to be happy with their children's schooling. As one

parent stated 'if it wasn't for the *Sikavni*, [my children] wouldn't be going to school at all' (Participant, Interview Q61, 28 March 2003). Nearly all parents have delegated full responsibility for their children's education to the *Sikavni* and few take an active interest in its activities.

Those parents who have children currently attending the *Sikavni* or who have attended in the past feel that the *Sikavni*-Open Access College Partnership is achieving the desired goal of an all-round education (that is, more than just literacy skills) and most are happy for their children to continue, provided of course, that they can still travel when they want. The comments below have been accumulated from *Kris* meetings and interviews with parents over the years of the *Sikavni* operations. They reflect both the positive and negative aspects of the comments made:

... with the right mix of teachers, it's pretty good
... better than Gajé school
... at least they keep our ways
... we know our kids won't be into drugs and knives
... its too restrictive, there's not the full range of activities that they would get at a Gajé school
... some of the [supervisors] are really strict and others are too slack
... that girl – what's her name … she was dangerous, we got rid of her just in time
... they taught my [child] how to read and write good, so now she can fill out forms for me
... we've still got control of our kids
... we tried it, but it was too hard to get the kids there every day, sometimes [husband] was working and I can't drive, we just travel now and we don't stop anywhere for too long
... they're teaching the kids to be able to cope in the Gajé world
... they teach them new trades
... it's a waste of time because they still need to learn one of our trades

An important component of quality is reflective practice in which the feedback given from stakeholders is not only listened to but also actioned. During interviews with

parents when they made comment on aspect of *Sikavni* operation, I made a point of asking whether they would like their comments – positive and negative – relayed to the *Kris*. The *Kris* listened to these comments and also to those of parents who had removed their children and often made important decision based on this feedback. For example, recently it was decided that a bigger focus on trade skills might keep more of the older children interested. Currently available options in-house include traditional herbal medicine (wayside healing), beauty therapy, gold-plating, fortune-telling and aspects of small business management. It is hoped that relationships will be forged with tertiary providers to enable other skills such as motor mechanics to be made available to students, particularly those at risk of early leaving.

As with any school, there are those children who will love the *Sikavni* and thrive in its environment and there are those who will find education boring and restrictive and who may not return. The *Sikavni* cannot be all things to all children, but it tries, because its future, to a large degree, rests squarely in the hands of the children. While they want to keep coming, the *Sikavni* has a good chance for survival. I have included here a range of comments offered by the children during participant observation at the *Sikavni* and during our interviews, some group comments and others individual. Comments included:

> ... I like my teacher in Open Access that I have this year, she's great
> ... we have phone lessons with Open Access, sometimes they're very annoying because we're usually doing something fun when they ring and if I haven't done my homework, I get into trouble
> ... it's a pain having to go to the *Sikavni* in the holidays, all the other kids don't
> ... yeah, but at least we get to go away when we want
> ... it's the best, I don't want to go back to my old school
> ... not doing homework is excellent
> ... yesterday I got to play the violin and the kaha thingey and the piano. At my old school I couldn't do any of that, dancing's a bit silly though

... the magic lessons are my favourite
... nothing, its boring, my mum makes me come
... seeing my cousins and my friends all the time
... riding the one-wheeled bike
... Cossack dancing makes me too tired, she makes us jump around the floor for so long
... singing is great, I'm going to be a singer when I'm older
... I had a fight with [child's name] the other day, he hit me

When interviewed, children tended to focus on the activities they enjoyed, in order to get any negative feedback at all from the younger students, I had to ask them specifically to describe what they did not like. The older children were generally more forthcoming and many attitudes of the older children reflected their parents' beliefs. An example of this is Josh whose attitude matches that of his parents; particularly in regards to the *Sikavni* (see pages 266-267).

The *Sikavni* does not subscribe to the belief that a high percentage of time spent on mastering basic skills through planned activities should mean that this is crammed into the shortest possible timeframe. Therefore, the *Sikavni* runs over as many weeks as the children want to attend (up to fifty-two weeks each year if needed). Finally, the Open Access College is responsible for the monitoring of the children's progress and uses the results to improve individual performance and the instructional programme. This was demonstrated when one of the children, despite being of an age when reading skills should have been advanced, was still demonstrating difficulties. The programme that was instituted could have been, but was not, called a remedial reading programme. The boy's reading skills were brought up to a more appropriate standard relatively quickly. Flexibility and taking into consideration the needs of the individual child are the key components to improving performance in the *Sikavni* and are an example of the way in

which excellence and effectiveness in teaching and learning are demonstrated in the *Sikavni*-Open Access College Partnership. This is also seen through the examples throughout in this chapter which include both children and young adults who have been successful in continuing their education and in finding work. All learning programs at the *Sikavni*, both Open Access College work and the cultural and vocational activities offered by the *Sikavni* take into consideration the educational history of the child, the language spoken at home and the challenges likely to be faced by the child in the *Sikavni* environment and offer a program to match the individual child.

An example of this is Mike. At thirteen he had fallen in with a group of older teenagers and had started making noises about moving out of home. His parents were without full time employment but did odd jobs when they became available. Mike is the oldest of four children (all school age), none of whom went to school which meant that he was often left home to watch the younger children when mum and dad went out to work. The owner of the caravan park (Hristo) where they were staying was also a car mechanic. Hristo offered Mike a deal. If Mike went to school and learned 'how to read and all that stuff', Hristo would give him a job as a boy-Friday in his mechanics yard with a promise that he would start Mike in a mechanics apprenticeship in two months if he was still doing well at school and in the yard. A special timetable was worked out for Mike that gave him time for everything and this was approved by Hristo and Mike's parents. Mike found reading difficult, but he could 'see the dollars' when it came to mathematics and has been increasingly successful in this area. He currently works as an apprentice car mechanic and he still attends the *Sikavni* twice a week. One day Mike intends to open his own mechanics yard (Mike, Interview Q31, 3 December 2001).

'The value of a school education is frequently judged by ... where pupils go when they leave and what they do, and whether or not the school has contributed to giving them a successful career or fulfilling vocation' (MacBeath, Meuret & Schratz 1997: 10). There are both successful and unsuccessful examples of student destination as a criterion of quality and this first example is a combination of both. The participant is Catherine, aged 18.

Catherine and two of her brothers and sisters were enrolled in the Open Access College and attending the *Sikavni*. They had previously been enrolled with Open Access several times. On at least one occasion their enrolment had been cancelled by the Open Access College, but this last time they had been withdrawn by their mother and enrolled in the local mainstream school because she had a little baby and could not manage all the children at home and help with their school work while tending to the youngest. They had been enrolled at the local school for almost one week when one of the younger children refused to return. Nicole phoned and asked if they would be able to attend the *Sikavni*, even though they lived at least a one hour drive away. It was organised that they would catch the train into the city with their mother, who would drop them off and take her daughter-in-law to do palm and tarot readings in the market.

It worked well for about six months and then the family moved to another state for personal reasons. Catherine wanted to be a chef, and she knew that to achieve that she had to go to TAFE and first complete school to year 11. She had decided by then that she was doing so well, she could probably even do year 12, even though she was already old enough to leave school. Because of her dream, she tried to continue with her

Open Access studies but before long, it had all fallen apart. She now has no job and has stopped studying. Mum became ill and spent a lot of time in hospital and so Catherine had to look after her younger siblings. The younger children were enrolled in the local school because 'at least that got them out of the house for a few hours each day', but it was too much for Catherine to continue studying with her added responsibilities.

There is occasional talk of the family moving back to Adelaide and Catherine talks of maybe returning to the *Sikavni*. Now though, she's thinking of enrolling in a beauty therapy course instead and completing it at the *Sikavni*. This would enable her to stay where she is comfortable and to look after her siblings while she studies at the *Sikavni* (Catherine, Interview Q54, 28 March 2003). This is an example of the flexible approach to individual schooling that could be offered by the *Sikavni*. If Catherine had continued her studies, her results may have led her to accomplish her goals. The results of student achievement are used to design individual instructional programs, in particular, the cases of Catherine and Mike demonstrate the effectiveness of the system of education used in the *Sikavni*-Open Access College partnership.

The Physical Environment

The area used by the *Sikavni* is quite small and its layout was designed as an open floor space with areas set aside for designated functions. The floor plan is attached in Appendix 8 and demonstrates the use of available space. This layout is similar to that typically favoured by some Roma in traditional, living quarters in that there is one large main room that is the centre of community activities and it is 'there that meals are taken and all visitors are received' (Williams 1982: 331). This is supported by participant

observation in many Roma households in Australia, which although they may be composed of several rooms will have only one that is the focus of family and community gatherings. Thus, this one large room houses all facets of *Sikavni* life, that is: social, learning and physical education. Additional rooms are available for use on an as needs basis.

Displays have been made of the music and dance equipment that supervisors are able to access these for classes. The use of the musical instruments and costumes as decoration encourages children to become involved in all facets of vocational training. Other decorations include samples of the children's Open Access schoolwork that the children are actively encouraged their hang their work on the wall or from one section of the roof in typical schoolroom fashion:

> Look, I put my picture on the wall, when my mummy comes, she can see how what I did. We watched some videos of dancing with [supervisor] and then we drawed them, well [supervisor] helped me to draw them, but I coloured them, that's my mummy dancing and that's my daddy, he's playing the guitar ...
>
> (Chantal, Interview Q62, 17 March 2003)

The students also make a variety of their own instruments as a component of their music appreciation sessions and these are displayed in the *Sikavni*. There are often specific displays of Romani culture as festivals approach and the children learn about these traditions. The space allocated allows for the best use of equipment, play materials, displays with adaptation for special needs. The overall effect is an environment that is culturally sensitive and reflects the diversity of the community. The *Sikavni* is a stimulating learning environment that encourages learning in all areas of academic and artistic endeavours.

Specialist supervisors are trained in the use of equipment for example, the gymnastic trampoline, musical instruments and dancing accessories such as swords. Computer programs, videos, toys, equipment and books reflect the diversity within the community and are often donated or loaned to the *Sikavni*. Access to these facilities is also important as some children come from homes where often computers and sometimes video players are not available for use.

Wheelchair entry is available and allows for easy access to all areas of the *Sikavni*. The layout of the *Sikavni* is such that there is no outdoor space for play. Use is made of local parks and playground areas. Those utilised in this manner are fenced areas within walking distance of the *Sikavni*. The *Sikavni* has policies regarding health and safety issues such as smoking and drug or alcohol consumption on the premises or in view of the children at any time. The children are responsible for daily tidying and general cleaning of the *Sikavni* and professional cleaners are brought in once weekly. Security is of paramount concern and the door that opens to the street is locked at all times and no visitors are admitted through that door. Access to the *Sikavni* by visitors is only by prior arrangement and all visitors are supervised at all times. Specialist teachers have a key that allows access only to the main *Sikavni* door. The head supervisor has a master key that accesses all doors. The fire/emergency drill is practised once a month and told to all children, visitors and supervisors on their first visit. Parents feel comfortable that their children are secure, both physically and culturally at the *Sikavni*. The physical environment contributes significantly to this comfort in that it is traditionally structured and culturally decorated:

> I know my children are safe there because I can't even get in [to the *Sikavni*] if they don't know I'm coming. It's a bit overdone maybe, but it is beautifully

> decorated and teaches the children a lot about Roma traditions. We all put a lot of effort into making it so good.
>
> (Pauline, Interview Q28, 7 October 2001)

Encouraging the community to play a main role in the setup and layout of the *Sikavni* had a significant impact on their appreciation of its role, both in educating their children but also the cultural impact of the physical layout.

Social and Community Development

The primary aim of the *Sikavni* with regards to social and community development is to provide the best possible environment in which all members of the Romani community are encouraged to contribute and participate. This is pursued using the following strategies:

- to encourage positive parent involvement in all aspects of the functioning of the *Sikavni* and to ensure that parents are continually informed and educated
- to provide the best possible physical environment and the best possible standard of materials and aids to maximise the children's opportunities of learning
- to provide supervisors with a good working environment and to encourage professional development to ensure personal satisfaction and maximum opportunity for learning
- to provide a general environment of discipline and order within which the children may develop to responsible adulthood
- to ensure a proper balance between Romani teaching and the general curriculum so that children may develop into well-educated Roma

(Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language 2001: 3)

The relationship between the *Sikavni* and the community is complex, not the least because of its unique role in the community, a community that has not traditionally embraced the concept of formal education. This causes concern because this relationship draws life from the community:

> Schools exist within communities and draw their life from those communities. They receive support from the community and benefit from its resources and opportunities for learning. They also have to respond to its social and economic problems - poverty, unemployment, vandalism, crime.
>
> (MacBeath, Meuret & Schratz 1997: 10)

One of the *Sikavni*'s major problems remains the lack of recognition by many Romani parents of the value of formal education. There is a lot of support for the *Sikavni*'s endeavours, however, there are still many barriers to overcome to encourage the full support of the parents.

By comparison, it has been stated that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to assert the right for their children to access quality education services that provide a security of culture and identity, and the best educational outcomes' (Williams 2002: 1). The Romani community in this study has not. Community involvement relies on the involvement of parents; it requires the school to 'reach out to parents, enlisting their help and advice in the education of the children' (Stone 1995: 797). Most parents know that the *Sikavni* deals with the mainstream educational needs of their children's lives. This they believe negates their obligation to be involved. Their level of involvement is generally through the *Kris* as discussed in Chapter 8.

As a direct consequence of this, parents are not expected to support their child's learning unless they express a desire to become involved. Their involvement is sought in choosing subjects to complete and extra vocational activities for their child and this has been a successful way of encouraging their involvement. The parental support for the children's education is provided by the supervisors and the *Sikavni*. There are some

parents who are very involved in the education of their children and they play an active role, however, one important way in which the *Sikavni* has been able to support the community has been the rule that all school work for the Open Access College is completed at the *Sikavni;* it is never taken home. This ensures that for families where illiteracy is an issue, there is less chance for ridicule or feelings of inferiority being put on other family members.

> At the other school, I had to bring school work home every day and because I missed so many days, they always gave me more. But when I go home, mum needs me to help with the babies. Now I don't have to do homework because I do it all at in the day, it's a lot easier, mum doesn't shout at me all the time for not helping.
>
> (Participant, Interview Q63, 28 March 2003)

The *Sikavni* is available over the five working days as a learning centre and on Saturday for dancing and more cultural activities. The facilities are available for completing Open Access school on any day when a supervisor is available and so 'homework' can be completed at any time during the day. The Open Access College sends reports for each child to the *Sikavni* and these are either given to the children to give to the parents or communicated directly with the parents depending on individual wishes. Regular communication between the supervisors and the Open Access College ensures that the academic progress of child is monitored and communicated regularly. Concerns and praise are communicated at this time.

One of the ways in which the *Sikavni* has been able to demonstrate its value to the community has been through a children's concert. This example highlights how utilising traditional vocations such as dance and music has enabled the *Sikavni* to contribute to the community. It has been said that 'ethnic groups as distinct cultures will chose certain occupations as forms of social participation' and this is certainly true of the Rom

(Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992: 7). Festivals and social gatherings always incorporate music and dancing as an integral component of celebrations. Therefore it is important for the children to be able to participate in such events.

For example, towards the end of 2002, the *Sikavni* children were invited to perform as a Romani Children's Group at a festival in January 2003. Even though the festival did not eventuate, the children continued to rehearse their performance. The children asked permission to hold their own 'festival' and so the 'First Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language Concert' was held on November 9, 2003 in a venue larger than the *Sikavni*. The concert had twelve acts ranging from 'Circus Acrobatics' to the 'Gypsy Cossack Dancing' and included a wide variety of skills. The ages of the children varied from four and a half to fourteen. Not all of the children joined in, but they did all attend and many have indicated that they would like to perform next time. The *Sikavni* provided nibbles and drinks for the guests who numbered about fifty-five. The music teachers all joined in and played music while the children were changing between acts. It was a memorable day and the children had such a great time they want to do it all again every year. Since this concert, there have been seven parents (from five different *familia*) previously unwilling to become involved who have now agreed that a yearly concert will help to provide valuable recognition of their children's talent and they have offered to assist with organising the next concert. The concert has proven to be an instigator of change and promoted a transformation of attitude in several families. Thus the aim of the *Sikavni* to improve community relationships is succeeding.

In addition to the children's own concert, several of the specialist teachers have discovered that their students are more than willing to participate in public performances and they have accommodated these desires by scheduling public performances. Some performances have been as the *Sikavni* and others as part of wider cultural groups. Many of these appearances are paid, others are voluntary. Examples of outside performances include the 2003 SA Maritime Museum 'Circus Fun', 2003 Lobethal Lights Festival, 2004 Fringe Festival, 2002 and 2003 Multicultural Festival Day, a performance at the Police Barracks and the Open Access College's Teacher's Professional Development Day. Building the capacity of the whole community is an important aspect of *Sikavni* function. For example, Shelley's lack of literacy was causing problems with self-image and feelings of inadequacy. Josh and Shelley had been married by Romani tradition for eleven months. As a young couple, they are living with his parents until they want to and can afford to move out. Josh cannot read and write and feels he is making a reasonable living without these skills:

> Dad and I, we go out and do jacks and handyman work, we've built up a good client-base in both areas and we work well together. I s'pose I could go and learn at this new place but I can't really see the point. Shelley's got this bee in her bonnet, she thinks she has to learn how to read and write to make a success of her life, like she's not doing a great job already. I think she's been listening to you too much, that's what I think.
>
> (Josh, Interview Q32, 18 December 2001)

Shelley on the other hand wanted to be able to read and write. She wanted to work and although Josh did not approve and neither did his family, Shelley felt strongly about the issue, she was seventeen years old and wanted to be able to start a family in the next two years. Josh was working with his father and bringing in some money, but Shelley felt that if they both worked, then they could buy a caravan earlier. Josh's mum agreed

to help her to improve her card skills and in the end, her persistence won through. She started a literacy program at the *Sikavni* (as distinct from an educational program) because the goal was for her to be able to read forms and notices and keep some simple notes about the money she earned. She would work in the market with Josh's mother telling fortunes and selling herbal mixtures to go with her readings. As reading became easier for her, she was also taught the uses of herbal plants and how to recognise the plants. After eight months she started working, continuing in the *Sikavni* on a less regular basis, but still learning about the herbal plants from home. She felt that she was now a useful member of the family with a lot to contribute:

> Before I started working in the market, I felt a bit useless. I mean I would help with keeping the house and watching the kids, but if there wasn't quite enough money to go around in a week, it made me feel bad that I couldn't help more. Josh's family have been so good to me, I really wanted to do something more. This was my present to Josh, a wife he could really be proud of, he might think I'm being silly, but this really means a lot to me.
>
> (Shelley, Interview Q49, 22 January 2003)

Valuing and building on the skills of Roma in the community has been a focus of the *Sikavni* and it has assisted in building strong community relationships as this case in point demonstrates.

Another way in which the *Sikavni* has been able to assist the community has been to bring to light the traditional skills of elders. One of the skills that Geoff has is gold-plating. Geoff has never 'taught anyone anything ever before' and describes himself as 'worried they'll know more than me' (Geoff, Interview Q39, 28 May 2002). He agreed to participate only when it was pointed out to him that he has a unique skill and therefore no-one could possibly know more, especially not those who want to learn. It is

a very traditional Romani skill and he is one of a few, in Australia, who still know how to do it. Arrangements to buy the equipment were made and two of the wealthier families gave the *Sikavni* a donation to enable this ambitious project. The class has not started yet as the *Sikavni* is waiting for the equipment to arrive, but there are six anxious boys, one girl and about fourteen excited adults all waiting to be taught gold-plating. One of the aims of the community-based learning in the *Sikavni* is to involve the whole community in the learning/teaching process, in the traditional way of the Romani people.

The above examples demonstrate the positive side of the local community's attitude towards the *Sikavni.* If it were possible to encapsulate the feelings of the wider Romani community in a single word, 'suspicious' would be the most appropriate. There are many who have never heard of the *Sikavni* for word of mouth is the only way such news travels and some of these Roma declare that the *Sikavni* is all a figment of someone's overactive imagination. Inevitably, the conversation at many parties turns to the *Sikavni* and from those Roma – who live interstate and who have never seen the *Sikavni* – there are plenty of rumours to fuel any fire. The quotes below have been assembled from interactions (not formal interviews) with Roma I have met socially and in meetings who have heard of the *Sikavni* but never seen it. The comments offered usually started with the phrase 'I heard that…':

... it's just a tin shed
... the *Sikavni*'s got so much money its like a palace
... the people who run it are making millions out of the Roma and the government but they won't give us any
... they get one thousand dollars for every Romani child in Australia
... it's not run by Roma, the Gajé use it as a way to lure the kids into school
... they don't teach the kids anything useful

... they only teach religion – that new one
... it's in Brisbane
... it's in Cairns
... it was in Darwin but they got caught by the police for fraud so it moved to Melbourne
... it doesn't really exist at all, someone just made it up, it's just a scam to get money out of us.

This is just a selection of the rumours, albeit the most dramatic and most contradictory. They are presented here to highlight the types of insecurities that are prevalent in the Romani community in Australia. Underlying the suspicion is (amongst others) the fear of losing their children to the Gajé world and this was often expressed in other less personal ways. In social groups where more than one *familia* was present, the rumours often became so outlandish that others in the group denied the very possibility. But when it was a one-on-one conversation or small group, there was always an eagerness to know more, usually followed by an exclamation of 'why didn't we have a school like that, I could've gone' or 'why don't they have one in [my city]'.

Social Experience and Personal Development

The social environment of the *Sikavni* incorporates the relationships between supervisors and the children and managing behaviour within the context of these relationships. Adults who take on a role in the *Sikavni* are expected to act as role models for the children providing guidance for their personal development.

The primary aims of the *Sikavni* with regards to social experience and personal development is to contribute to the development of the whole person – intellectually, spiritually, socially and physically and to enhance individual interests, talents and abilities. In achieving this, the *Sikavni* aims to develop in all children the acquisition of

social skills that will enable them to function effectively and harmoniously in Australia's multicultural society, but this should not be at the expense of retaining their pride in their cultural heritage. To facilitate both these aims the following strategies direct *Sikavni* activities:

- to develop an awareness of themselves and others as unique individuals
- to develop a knowledge and understanding of and respect for the laws of Australia
- to develop in the children a sense of belonging to the Romani community
- to develop positive personal qualities such as self-confidence, kindness, self discipline, good manners and independence
- to develop positive social qualities such as tolerance, the ability to share, mutual support and respect for persons and property
- to encourage upholding of Romani culture and traditions
- to expose the children to the cultural heritage of the Romani people and to encourage the experience of as wide a variety of forms of artistic expression as possible
- to provide as wide a range of experiences as possible to develop cooperation, responsible social behaviour and understanding of others
- to run the *Sikavni* according to Romani beliefs
- to teach about the cultural backgrounds of the children in the school within the context of the curriculum
- to teach all aspects of the Romani culture, including beliefs, practices and history
- to teach children to be tolerant of other religions and cultures and to encourage them not to express antagonism when confronted with different beliefs and customs
- to teach the Romani language

(Australian Romani School of Gypsy Culture and Language 2001: 1)

A difficulty faced by the *Sikavni* on several occasions has been in finding appropriate adult role models; those who understand Romani traditions, but also possess an understanding of mainstream society. Provision of role models who have successfully integrated mainstream and Romani cultures assist the *Sikavni* to provide 'quality education to such students in ways that integrate them into both their own and the majority culture' (Brisk 1998: 160). In an attempt to provide such a role model, in

September 2001, a new music teacher was chosen. Steve was a well educated English Gypsy who had been a musician and practising social worker (with youth) in England several years prior to moving to Australia in 1993. As a Rom, the *Kris* believed that his value system and understanding of issues such as *marimé* would be comparable with those of the Australian Romani community. As a Rom educated in mainstream schools, it was believed that he would have a good understanding of mainstream society as well as working with youth.

The first thing Steve did in the classroom was to assure all the children that he considered them all to be his equals. This was an adventure and they were in it together. The children were to treat him as their friend as well as their teacher. Even though this made everyone on the *Kris* a little nervous, it rang no alarm bells. His role was supposed to be teaching music and providing a good role model for the children, but the attitudes he brought to the classroom on sexual relationships before marriage, same sex marriages, family relationships were too liberal for the community. Added to this was his willingness to discuss these topics with any child, from the six year olds up to the teenagers and this meant that in the end, he had to be supervised.

Although there was not one incident that caused concern, there were a growing number of episodes where the children would go home with strange comments. One of these is highlighted in the excerpt from an interview with John (aged 9 years) below:

> John: I know how to talk like a gay person
> Interviewer: How do you know that?
> John: Steve taught me, he lives next door to a gay so he copied how he talks and now he can do it really well.
> Interviewer: Why does he need to be able to do it really well?
> John: So that he can use it in his shows.
>
> (John, Children Group Interview Q30, 8 October 2001)

Counselling Steve was to no avail, because children 'have a right to know about these things' (Steve, Interview, 8 October 2001). In the end he was asked to leave. There was concern within the *Kris* that parents would soon start removing their children from the *Sikavni*. The negative media coverage, the prejudice perceived by the Romani community, and the difficulties associated with the attempt to register a non-Government school and the inappropriate role models caused difficulties in winning and keeping parental approval of the *Sikavni*.

There are clear boundaries for acceptable behaviour in the *Sikavni* for the adult specialist teachers, the supervisors and the children. There are several levels of consequences for unacceptable behaviour and these are known to all concerned. An up-to-date copy of every policy is maintained in the *Sikavni* for supervisors to access and all specialist teachers are now given a copy of the relevant policies before they start. Romani custom dictates that not only adults, but also older children must be given the respect of the younger children.

Naturally some of the assistant supervisors have devised ways of assisting the desired behaviour to develop. Barbie, a young supervisor, has introduced a reward system with one group that includes her younger brother, Roger. Barbie was finding that Roger and some of the other boys were starting to push each other into more and more antics during lessons usually resulting in fights. She needed a way to stop this from escalating out of control:

> What I did was to give points for good behaviour and take them away when the kids were naughty. It worked really well. Like the other day, Michael pushed Louise for no reason that I could see. When they wouldn't tell me what

> happened I took five points away from Michael, then I separated them for a little while and it was all okay again.
> We wrote the points up on a board that no-one but me was allowed to touch and at the end of the week, we added them up and I raffled off little things, like from the two-dollar shop and stuff. The kids could only bid as much as they had points. They enjoyed it and it helped me to not get angry when they were naughty. I did it for a while but I don't need to do it anymore.
>
> (Barbie, Interview Q56, 28 March 2003)

For many young people in mainstream society, school is a major component of their social lives. For Romani children, even those who attend mainstream schools, this role of the school has not been developed to the same extent. The social environment in the *Sikavni* matches that of the Romani community in that the style of discipline matches that found in Romani homes. This assists the children because Romani society varies markedly to mainstream western society (Morrow 1998; Smith 1997; Hancock 2002) and these traditional roles and customs are not reflected in mainstream schools. For example, in Romani communities children are not required to sit quietly for extended periods of time. In the *Sikavni,* periods of time for learning abstract facts are interspersed with physical activity and vocational or cultural learning.

The *Sikavni* has been working hard on building links with the community, involving parents, friends and interested others to improve the social environment of the *Sikavni.* Several Romani festivals have been held at the *Sikavni* with short performances by *Sikavni* students at each to showcase their skills. At each of these festivals, according to Romani custom, the whole community participates in these showcases. Inviting the wider community to the *Sikavni* for these festivals has helped to break down some of the prejudices of the community against schooling. The social aspect of schooling being a new experience for many Roma, they could 'see the fun in going to a place like the *Sikavni*, if you had to go to school' (Carrie, Interview Q60, 2 November 2003).

SUMMARY

This chapter has measured the effectiveness of the *Sikavni* using some common quality indicators found in the literature. The experiences of the children and their families in the *Sikavni* have been used to demonstrate its weaknesses and strengths. Using English criteria of quality (Lambeth Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership 2002) and incorporating Australian (National Quality Schooling Framework 1996; MCEETYA 2000) and European (MacBeath, Meuret & Schratz 1997) criteria has ensured an international benchmark for assuring quality. The four criteria of excellence being: teaching and learning; the physical environment; social and community development; and social experience and personal development. If quality is a measure of the extent to which a school (Hoy & Miskel 2001: 308) 'meets or exceeds customer or client expectations' then the *Sikavni* is a quality organisation.

If, in the words of Adewuji (2002: 269), 'what counts as effectiveness is the will of the school authority to create and maintain facilitating conditions under which inputs are attracted and used in order that the majority of students pass' through each academic year, then the partnership between the *Sikavni* and the Open Access College is effective.

The next and final chapter draws together the various strands of the study and revisits the themes of the original research questions.

Chapter 10

Conclusions, Looking into the Future and Considering the Options

INTRODUCTION

In addition to discussing how the findings address the objectives of the study, this chapter looks to the future educational needs of the Romani people in Australia and discusses the applicability and usefulness of the *Sikavni* in the Australian context. The broader implications of this research pertaining to alternative schooling, literacy education, multicultural education, the education of minority children and educational administration are also drawn out. Finally, ideas for future research that have arisen during the course of this study are highlighted.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

If the *Sikavni* in its current form sounds too good to be true, then it probably is. The real benefits or disadvantages of the *Sikavni* will not really be known for some time. This

study has shown that on a small scale such a venture is possible. However, for a larger group of children such a model may not be successful and this leads to the need for further research such as a longitudinal of the key participants and the financial viability of such ventures. Not unduly highlighted in this thesis have been the seemingly never-ending energy of the core group of people who form the administrative team; the heated discussions that have accompanied the decision-making process; the sleepless nights of the participants; the fear that a child may leave the *Sikavni*, not bound for school, but for illiteracy; and the continual financial contribution of families within the community to ensure the *Sikavni* continues. As one participant stated:

> It's not that my kids wouldn't have done well in school, the problem is that sooner or later – and probably sooner – I would have had enough of the system and its rules and regulations, its inflexibility and the way it treats my kids. I would've taken them and run. We'd still be on the move.
>
> (Marcia, Interview Q64, 29 March 2003)

One of the original ideals was that the *Sikavni* would be able to provide schooling for children both face-to-face and by distance education. This would allow parents to travel and not prevent the children from continuing their education. During interviews with members of the Independent Schools Board, the Planning Committee for Non-Government Schools, and the Non-Government Schools Registration Board, it became clear that no non-Government distance education schools are registered in South Australia and that for this to be approved would require ministerial intervention (by the Minister for Education and Children's Services) which would not eventuate. The other difficulty lies in the lack of literacy and poor comprehension of mainstream school-based education of the parents and so this dream may have to wait to eventuate with the next generation of parents, those who have been educated in either one of, or a

combination of the *Sikavni*, Open Access College, home schooling and mainstream schools.

The *Sikavni* has striven to maintain a multicultural rather than monocultural atmosphere through the use of the mainstream curriculum complemented by Romani cultural activities. Additionally the children attending the *Sikavni*, even though they represent one specific ethnic group, have come from many countries around the world and not all have spoken English on arrival. Learning to communicate with each other has afforded these children an opportunity to learn about other countries and their different traditions. Therefore, multicultural learning activities are not discrete and they do not focus on simply learning another language – they have been incorporated into the curriculum as well as being an integral component of the learning environment.

This study has found that few Roma in Australia have educational aspirations in the traditional western sense of the word. There is sometimes ambition to finish school and go to university but individuals with these aspirations comprise a minority. There is generally no value to be found in the concept of being educated. One of the difficulties this study confronted is the belief widely held in mainstream society that education and schooling are synonymous. Embedded within this belief is a lack of value placed on non-western traditions of learning (Reagan 2000: 5). Reagan supports this assertion by arguing that throughout the history of education and in philosophical discussions of education, western society (described as the dominant paradigm) has focused almost entirely on a single educational tradition (schooling) to the exclusion of virtually all others. Reagan (2000) describes scholars as promoting the belief that education and

schooling are synonymous because education is only about the role of literacy and a literary tradition:

> To improve the lot of Roma children in state education throughout Europe requires nothing short of a radical set of reforms, new and dynamic responses to the challenges of multicultural education, and a completely different mindset among educators and legislators.
>
> (Krause 1998: 2)

Interestingly, few parents could really describe the goals or purposes of traditional Romani education. The parents who could are those who are well educated with a sound grasp of the mainstream connotations of the term 'education'. During my research, when a question I posed to respondents was qualified by the addition of, 'you know when you teach them how to get on in life', the purposes of traditional Romani education were able to be more clearly verbalised by respondents. At the *Kris* meeting in March 2003, the most common purposes of traditional Romani education were described as:

- to instil respect for Roma elders and Roma in a position of authority
- to have a healthy distrust of all things Gajé
- to learn how to work hard for their family to bring in enough money to keep all the family
- to learn how to work the system to get what you want
- to understand, appreciate and practice traditional Romani customs.[1]

(*Kris* Elders, Interview Q51, 17 March 2003)

Mention of education for the sole purpose of gaining literacy was brought up only once and discarded. However, when prompted, the majority of parents agreed that being able to read, write and do financial calculations were useful skills to assist with working the

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[1] In order to direct the flow of conversation, I used ideas from Reagan (2000: 26).

mainstream system. There appeared to be little respect for education other than in this context. One parent explained that 'those sort of things weren't really important' and quoted 'Maškar le Gajende leski čhib si le Romenski zor - Surrounded by the Gajé, the Roma's tongue is his strength' as proof (Pauline, Interview Q51, 17 March 2003).

BROADER IMPLICATIONS

At the beginning of this thesis (p. 16), I stated that success in education cannot be achieved by only examining the way schools are administered, but success needs to take into consideration the nature of the relationships within the school and its relationships with the wider community. I also stated that 'the development of administrative theory pertaining to education needs to include the views of those standing outside the mainstream cultural milieu, if truly equitable outcomes are to be achieved' (p. 31). This case study supports these assertions. The implications of change in the area of educational administration are such that lend credence to the ideas of Edgar (1999) who believes that the implications of the changing nature of society on education must warrant fundamental changes to the ways in which education is provided. He presents concepts of centralised administration and decentralised learning assisted by educational networks and learning webs powered by the technology now available (Edgar 1999: 5). Learning models such as the Sikavni illustrates, could form part of these networks and webs.

This research supports the view that because Romani children do not fit easily into mainstream schooling, reform and change are required particularly in the areas of policy

and administration (Smith 1997: 16; Krause 1998: 2). Smith (1997: 16) illustrates this point well:

> Mainstream education ... fails to meet the needs of Romani children in a number of ways. The controlled and confused environment of the classroom provides little scope for independence, creativity and pride in a Romani cultural heritage. The creation of an education system designed to meet the needs of Romani children is highly unlikely; instead, a common ground needs to be found, one which acknowledges the structural problems which Romani children face at school such as poverty and racism, and one which recognises the Romani child socialisation and education process.

Mainstream societies are fluid and constantly changing and modern education needs to be built on constructs and philosophies that that are responsive to this constant state of change. As identified by Morrow (1998), it is essential that any education provided will assist the Roma to ensure their survival as a minority culture, whilst facilitating greater participation in and contribution to the mainstream society, particularly through increased literacy skills (Heath 1996: 13).

On the Australian television show 'A Current Affair', aired on January 21, 2004, there was a debate about the divide between public and private schooling and which was better. The debate was sparked by public comments from Prime Minister Howard (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2004: para 1) which were, at face value, that because public schools were 'politically correct' they were therefore values neutral. The question being asked on the television programme to stimulate debate was, 'Do private schools provide a better education in terms of values and discipline?' Comments from the audience were varied and predictable. In fact, to progress the discussion and debate, a more meaningful question that could be asked is, 'Is there one type or system of schooling that is right for everyone?' followed by 'If so, what type of schooling is best

for every child?' There were passionate arguments put forward for both sides, but as this debate clearly shows, there is not one system of schooling that is right for every child, person or family.

Mainstream society in Australia today is built on, any in many ways reflects, the many different cultures of its individuals. It has been said that 'Australia does not have distinct cultural groups that endure in any significant way' (Galligan & Roberts 2003: 2). Therefore, it could be anticipated that the education system that serves mainstream society would also reflect this broader diversity. However, despite this societal diversity, current schooling systems in Australia consist of two main sectors (private and public) offering either mainstream or alternative education. Restricting the diversity of educational possibilities into this type of binary model (mainstream and alternative), narrows choice and prevents the evolution of a truly multicultural society that celebrates difference. As Krause (1998: 2) points out:

> Real integration without assimilation means according equal respect to minority cultures and celebrating rather than denigrating difference. Meeting this challenge requires ambitious programs which will perceive "strangeness" as positive and enriching, building trust and understanding in a dialogue of equality between teachers and Roma pupils and parents.

Educational provision should instead celebrate differences, thus ensuring the survival of this diversity. It may be that if there were a more varied array of educational possibilities available to the general public, then 'different' would not be 'different' any more. Maybe 'different' would be 'normal' instead.

Sitting more towards the mainstream end of the alternative education continuum is the *Sikavni*, arguably making use of most of the desirable characteristics of all educational options available in Australia. Its current structure enables the provision of mainstream education through a public institution combined with schooling though an alternative 'home school' environment. Further exploitation of Edgar's (1999) applications could see a much broader applicability of institutions such as the *Sikavni* for both ethnic groups and mainstream children who do not fit into mainstream schools.

ADDRESSING THE STUDY'S OBJECTIVES

This component of the discussion brings together the original guiding themes of the study with the findings. It does so by addressing each of the research questions in turn.

How have the experiences of the Romani people in mainstream society affected their participation in mainstream schooling?

Chapter 2 addressed this question from an international perspective examining theories explaining why Roma internationally have not embraced mainstream or alternative schooling for their children. The barriers investigated included issues such as racism, unsuitability of educational methods used in educational institutions, psychological testing and relevance of education to life, and lack of access to culturally appropriate support.

Analysis of available literature highlights conflict between the ways in which Romani children learn in the home/community environment and those required in the school environment as a significant barrier to equitable access to education (Smith 1997: 6-18).

This is further magnified by the socially constructed images of Romani people held by mainstream society portraying Roma as people who should be either ignored or detested (For example see István Fenyvesi's article titled "Citizens! Watch out! There are Gypsies in the passenger section: Roma in the Ukrainian media",). Even in Australia, stereotypical images presented in the media include 'young girls dancing with wild abandon, dirty young men brushing with the wrong side of the law, road-side fortune tellers, exotic caravans [and] colourful scarves and beads' (Morrow 1998: 44). Smith (1997: 6) states that 'a child's identity is shaped by the norms, values and behaviours of the culture in which he or she is raised'. The environment in which Romani children are raised is likely to be significantly different, culturally and socially, from that of mainstream society. Educational institutions are 'typically a direct reflection of the culture of the educational system in which the institution functions' (McTaggart 1991: 297). The structure of a Romani child's identity will therefore have little in common with the children with whom they share the mainstream classroom. Such an environment is also therefore unlikely to be a welcoming experience for Romani children as it is so firmly based in mainstream cultural traditions. Thus it could be hoped, but not always expected that Romani children will achieve academic success in a school based on mainstream cultural values (that is, values different from their own).

In Europe the remedial schools – attended mainly by Romani children – have been staffed with poor quality teachers and are characterised by a lack of suitable resources. These are significant barriers to the gaining of literacy and will prevent the formation of a tradition of literary promotion amongst the Romani people. The formation of these schools is mainly the result of poverty, political difficulties and institutionalised racism

as examined in Chapter 2. The quality schools that do exist focus only on literacy, mainstream school subjects in preparation for mainstream school entry and provide little instruction in Romani culture, language and history. Institutional racism remains an enormous barrier to Roma participation in mainstream society, not just education. An example of the institutional racism and the ingrained nature of the philosophy of 'remedial' schools in Europe is the statement below made by the European Union's Ambassador to Slovakia in an interview broadcast on Dutch television:

> It may sound simplistic, but it is, I think in the root of the cause that we have to strengthen the education and re-organise the educational system in a way that we will have to start to, I'll say it in quotation marks, force Roma children to stay in boarding schools from Monday morning until Friday afternoon, where they will be subjected to the system of values which is dominant ('vigerend') in our society.
>
> (van der Linden 2004)

On being asked whether he thought Romani families would accept their children being removed from their families in this manner, van der Linden replied:

> I don't think that they will accept it so easily. And after all we live here in a democracy, so I don't think you can force it, but you can try to let it evolve more smoothly through financial considerations.
>
> (van der Linden 2004)

Institutional racism is not a feature of the past in Europe, as the above strategy, proposed in May 2004, demonstrates. Notwithstanding the success of the *Sikavni* in its current form, the difficulties encountered during the development of a registered alternative school for Romani children were perceived by the Romani community to be racially motivated. This perception raises the question of whether other ethnic minority groups have encountered similar experiences. The lack of familiarity with the political

environment of the education system in Adelaide also contributed to the events as they transpired.

What types of alternatives in education are available in Australian and international schooling systems for Romani people in Australia?

Alternative educational options available in Australia include both schools and the use of alternative pedagogies within schools. There is public schooling, private non-denominational schools, private religious schools, school of the air and home schooling. Within this range of alternative schools are a wide variety of pedagogies, some aspire to promote mainstream values and others promote alternative views. The *Sikavni* is in some aspects, a model of a typical alternative school in that it focuses on what it can offer the students in an alternative setting, while adapting some of the rules of mainstream education (Iowa Association of Alternative Education n.d.). It also relies on Morley's (1991) premise that every person is educable, but that the environment in which each person learns best may vary.

United States models of Romani schooling as portrayed by Hancock (see also Chapter 3) are those in which the facilities are physically available, but not utilised by Roma. By contrast, it would appear from examination of the literature that in Europe (see Chapters 2 and 3) these facilities are not always physically available. Therefore, although providing valuable information, most of the European models could not be considered for implementation here in Australia or in the *Sikavni* because the external social, political, economic and educational environments are fundamentally different. For example, in Australia because abject poverty is not a major problem, there is no need

for the *Sikavni* to provide running water for washing because this is a standard element of metropolitan housing. There are no *mahala* as the Roma in Australia have chosen to live in reasonable but not close proximity to each other, metropolitan roads are sealed, there is usually only one *familia* living in a house (even though there may be more than one generation), there is food for everyone most of the time and when there is not, others within the community have resources to share. Therefore, although the goals may be the same across the world, the means with which to attain these goals are not. Roma across the world share similar histories, culture, language and experiences of exclusion, discrimination and racism. But Australia and the United States provide the unique experience of having access (in most cases) to schools; funds to purchase books and pencils, to buy adequate clothing and footwear to attend school; and if children experience racism at school, they have the right to demand that this be addressed by the system. Both countries provide avenues for the setting up of schools with support from 'the government' to do so.

The main similarity therefore, between the United States and Australia, is that many Roma are choosing not to send their children to mainstream schools even though they are easily available and compulsory. Despite the availability of mainstream and alternative schooling options available, they are not always taken up by the Roma because they are not seen to be congruent with Romani beliefs. Roma in Australia do not believe that they are disadvantaged nor do they do feel that they occupy the lowest social strata in society as in Europe. This is partly because the class distinctions that are so critical in Europe are not so pronounced in Australia, but also partly due to the cloak of invisibility that has been adopted here.

A major difference between the educational possibilities in Australia and Europe was evident when visiting some of the Roma schools in Europe. In the kindergarten schools in Niš, Serbia, the focus was on preparing the children for entry into mainstream schools on both educational and social levels. There is currently no focus on early childhood education for Romani children in Australia. Although this would allow parents and children to become accustomed to going to school, there is no one population of children dense enough to allow such a targeted program. It is this lack of population density that has also hampered other initiatives that could have been trialled. Therefore the focus and needs of the children attending these schools is very different from those attending the *Sikavni* in Australia. I believe that this is the key difference between the European and Australian contexts.

The other main differences between past and present Romani schools in Europe, Australia and the United States can be summarised as follows. In Australia, setting up alternative schooling requires the approval of the mainstream education system. The *Sikavni* is one component of an alternative school that relies on private funding and the support of the mainstream school component. The *Sikavni* does not focus on preparing children to enter mainstream schooling but caters for the educational needs of Romani children. No child, Roma or non-Roma, has ever been turned away. There is, however, a wide focus on promoting a broad range of skills, both vocational in the traditional sense (trades) and Romani culture (music and singing) additional to literacy and numeracy skills and the mainstream curriculum.

In the United States, Romani schools appear to rely solely on government funding. They have been set up as alternative schools that specialise in preparation for entry into mainstream schools (this is a funding requirement). They appear to have focused solely on literacy and mainstream school subjects.

Some of the difficulties in accessing appropriate educational outcomes for Australian Romani children lay in the fact that many of the strategies identified by Morrow (1998: 222-229) require changes to government action on its policies (see Appendix 1). Despite the generic nature of these actions, for a minority of such small size, these changes are unlikely to eventuate. For example, the 'production and distribution of cultural information literature or packages for children to take to school' (Morrow 1998: 225) was trialled in 1996. A community organisation (with which I am involved) sent an information paper to the South Australian Department for Education and Children's Services. The paper was sent in response to difficulties that two Romani families were having with the education system:

> The paper briefly set out an introduction to the Romani people of Australia and highlighted some of the problems with the provision of education for Romani children ... The paper was acknowledged by the Executive Director whose response included the statement 'I have made a copy available to District Superintendents of Education'. Despite this claim, a District Superintendent in an appointment six months later, on a related issue, had no knowledge or interest in any such paper, or the problems experienced by the Romani people.
>
> (Morrow 1998: 225)

This does not mean that other larger (and therefore politically stronger) ethnic minority groups could take more of these identified options and utilise them to assist with the provision of culturally specific alternative or mainstream education for their children.

How Appropriate are these options for the educational needs and aspirations of Romani people in Australia?

When considering the needs of the Romani people, it is important to keep in mind that mainstream society in most countries is no longer homogeneous. There are a growing number of minority groups, all of which contribute to the growth and health of the society at different levels. Where schooling for all children is compulsory, education and schooling need to reflect the diversity of learning needs. Also, diversity of provision is important as there is no one way that is right for every child because each child is an individual.

There are alternative schools and alternative practices that can be adopted and often, as in the case of multicultural education, these have been integrated into mainstream education until they are no longer 'alternative'. Multicultural education has a key role to play in preparing students 'for life in an ethnically diverse society' through 'cognitive and affective benefits' (Webb 1990: 1). Webb also presents examples from other researchers (Fulton-Scott 1983; Hale 1986; Zaslavsky 1988) that assert that multicultural education promotes academic learning. These examples focus on incorporating culturally specific teaching material into the mainstream curriculum and this has been successfully achieved in the *Sikavni* through the close links with the community and the presentation of vocationally appropriate classes. This concept forms the basis of many *Sikavni* activities as demonstrated in the discourse of Chapter 9.

A fundamental premise in Romani communities is that children are considered to be 'miniature versions of adults, lacking only the motor strength and skill of adults and, of

course, lacking experience in life' (Gropper 1975: 130 quoted in Reagan 2000: 171). The implication of this belief for schooling (as versus education) is that schools remove children from their society. Romani children are then unable to contribute to their community in a useful manner for much of the day. This can in turn set off a spiral of low self-esteem because their ability to contribute to their own society has been marginalised, and yet they are not at home in school. The contribution they can make in school makes little sense because the community does not benefit. Individual praise, whilst important in the community, is not the cornerstone of contribution; it is the group effort that receives the acknowledgement. The *Sikavni* contributes to the community by ensuring that the children learn skills that will be valued for their contribution to the earning power of the community. This enhances the children's sense of self-value and ensures their contributory role in the community.

Romani parents do not see mainstream schooling as appropriate for their children from the age of eleven or twelve because from this age, they are seen as young adults capable of participating in the community. Attending school past this age is seen by the family as counter-productive and a waste of vital resources. Roma parents see little point in forcing young adults to remain in what they perceive as a foreign and often hostile environment. This situation poses a difficulty because the trend in Australia has been to raise the school leaving age. The Roma believe that denying the rights of young adults, forcing them to remain in a system in which they believe they do not belong, cannot achieve a favourable outcome.

In Europe, whilst leading political documents make a strong stand against discrimination in education, they are less than effective for the Romani people in many instances. For example, while the 1960 UNESCO 'Convention against Discrimination in Education' fails to cover stateless people such as the Roma (Gynther 2002: 32-38). Being born a Rom is not defined by being born in a particular country in a world in which your country of birth defines your birthright. Roma could be considered to be stateless outsiders in every country in the world. More often now than in the past, this is the world from which Romani children arrive in Australia. Many arrive directly from Europe with an ever increasing number from Eastern Europe, most as migrants, but some as refugees. Overt discrimination in their home countries has impacted on the lives of many of these children, particularly in education.

The *Sikavni* does not adopt a segregated approach as seen in Europe. The differences between the segregated schools in Europe and the *Sikavni* lie in the use of quality teachers (from the Open Access College) and the combination of mainstream educational and community resources. Segregated schools in Europe are used as filtering schools for government schools. As a non-Government entity, the *Sikavni* could not be forced to take in only children considered to be in need of 'remedial' assistance, however the *Sikavni* is able to admit any child. It is therefore important that no children or group of children are targeted for exclusion regardless of how much 'catching up' they need to do. In fact, Gajé children have participated in several activities with the *Sikavni* children. Over the period of its existence, four non-Romani children (from two non-related families) have been enrolled in the *Sikavni* and they left only when their parents moved interstate.

The Romani population in Australia is not large or politically cohesive enough to be able to achieve a community presence sufficient to provide the safeguards of political power. For this reason, the community does not believe that introducing Romani culture into mainstream schools is a reasonable or viable option. Those parents whose Romani heritage has been revealed at mainstream schools believe that this has been the reason for their children's misfortunes in that school, leading in at least three instances to the children being removed from the schools by the parents. Additionally, Romani families generally do not travel together in large groups as they do in Europe as this tends to bring unwelcome scrutiny. Therefore a distance education strategy of taking education to nomadic children as has been successfully implemented with the circus children in Queensland (Danaher 1998), would not be a financially viable option either but that is not to say that such a strategy may not have been successful if trialled.

This research has indicated that without modification, mainstream schooling is not appropriate for this group of Australian Romani children, particularly as it does not meet their educational needs and aspirations. Alternative types of schooling such as desegregated schools (as in the European model), private schools, the circus school and schools alternative in their educational philosophy (as in Steiner and Montessori schools) present similar difficulties as they also provide culturally insensitive education in a culturally inappropriate environment. Distance education is often not appropriate due to the illiteracy of the parents and the level of support needed by the children in this system.

What Rom-specific, pedagogically defensible options could be developed for the specific needs of the Rom?

One of the widely acknowledged purposes of schooling is to give children the cultural capital they need to survive in society. This aim is also true of education in non-Western cultures. The fundamental difference is that in these non-Western cultures the cultural capital is instilled by family or society elders, never by someone outside the (extended) family. Because racism on many levels has been directed at the Roma, both internationally and in Australia, the community is wary of embracing mainstream values and sending their children into mainstream schools. Added to this is that many Roma feel powerless in that they have no control or influence over the environment in which their children will spend a significant proportion of their day and week.

When considering suitable modes of delivery, it became obvious that the answer would not be a simple strategy that could be applied across the board to all families. Those families with high levels of literacy amongst either the older siblings or parents in general terms managed well with distance education whereas those with low literacy skills fared much worse. The other difficulty encountered with distance education was that the children were unable to progress without substantial assistance from outside the family and the Open Access Colleges. The *Sikavni* is an example of how intensive assistance could be provided to these children.

Taking into consideration the Australian environment, the distance between major cities and the lack of population density, the ideal school would be one that combines both face-to-face and distance pedagogies. This would ensure continuous education for

children, regardless of the state/territory they reside in and how much travelling they do. The option trialled in this research was to bring the Roma to education and apply a combination of distance learning within a face-to-face environment that retained many of the features of home schooling without the need for literacy or full understanding of the parents. Whilst this option has been successful, there are several instances described in Chapter 9 in which a true distance learning component to the *Sikavni* would have improved participation rates. It is also probable that this benefit may have been counter-balanced by the inability of the parents to assist the children with their work.

This research has shown that in overall terms of being Rom-specific, pedagogically defensible and meeting the needs of Roma in Australia, the *Sikavni* has demonstrated its ability to meet the specific educational needs of Romani children. It provides the best of both worlds according to Trueba and Bartolome (1997: 4), being the type of school that will provide the most likelihood of success in education. This is because it accurately reflects the children's own cultural heritage. For this same child, the type of school that will provide the most likelihood of success in mainstream society is one that most accurately reflects that society. Many of the organisational structures of western society are successfully utilised in the *Sikavni*, resulting in a culturally sensitive environment that provides an access point into mainstream society and gives the children an understanding of the ways they can effectively work with the Gajé. This was possible because of the level of integration of these Romani families into Australian society that has enabled the Romani people to camouflage themselves.

The answer to providing a pedagogically defensible option which would still be able to meet individual needs, is also embedded in the question about the 'assurance of quality learning outcomes' because the final choice of mode of delivery will be the one that provides the greatest advantage in terms of quality as discussed in Chapter 9. The experiences of the children and community in the *Sikavni* suggest that it presents a mode of delivery and pedagogy that can be considered appropriate in terms of both the education and schooling experience it provides. The children in this study have experienced mainstream education in an alternative environment and neither they, nor the community, have found significant fault with this experience. Some of the reasons for this have been shown to be that:

- The flexibility of approach which can be moulded to suit individual children: from the provision of more intensive literacy skills instruction to broad assistance and feedback;
- School support is available for the children: they are not struggling or isolated from their peers. In fact their social circle has a wider range of ages which improves social interaction capability;
- There is excellent peer support in a strong network of children (both older and younger) including supervisors who can assist with work;
- Children are able to progress at their own pace;
- There is opportunity for people of any age (even adults) to attend (Open Access enrolments – youngest 4½ and oldest 17. In the *Sikavni* the youngest is 3 ½ and oldest has been 17);
- A person can enter school at any stage of academic development and complete work appropriate for abilities rather than age;

- The flexible timetable allows for class times to be more easily re-arranged to suit individual needs;
- A culturally appropriate environment has been provided (reflecting aspects of both mainstream and Roma society);
- A culturally appropriate education experience has been provided; and
- The cultural heritage of children is promoted through classes which also help to boost the confidence of the children.

Thus, the *Sikavni* portrays many of Young's (1990: 2-3) characteristics of an alternative school and although in isolation these do not assure quality of learning outcomes, they have underpinned the *Sikavni* operations. They include the responsiveness of the *Sikavni* to a perceived educational need within the Romani community; provision of highly student-centred, individualised educational programs in a culturally appropriate environment that measures each child's progress is measured in terms of self-improvement rather than allowing the children to compete against each other for recognition. Vocationally-focused activities are offered as often as possible and the performing arts feature significantly. Individual and group skills in singing, dancing and with various musical instruments are promoted according to each child's ability. There is a shared sense of purpose in that the *Sikavni* goals and philosophies are upheld by students and staff. The *Sikavni* specialises in providing a rounded experience in which educational, vocational and affective facets are all catered for.

The *Sikavni* is very responsive to the needs of the community it serves although with regard to the educational needs of Romani children and young adults, but there are

occasions when the external (legal) requirements placed on the *Sikavni* must come first. This is particularly evident when looking at issues such as the scope of the curriculum (that is, the minimum the children must learn). Wherever possible, examples from Romani culture and traditions are used to explain world events and these subjects have been incorporated into the mainstream curriculum.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In 1998, Roma in Australia put forward some of their own ideas for possible strategies to improve participation rates and achievements in education (Morrow 1998). The research that grew from those recommendations resulted in this research project. One of the stated aims of the 1998 study was to identify avenues for improving the education of Romani children in Australia, but at the same time allowing perpetuation of the culture. One of the aims of this research was to identify the educational options that could be adapted to the educational needs of Romani children. One aim of future research could therefore be to broaden the applicability of this 'pilot' project to other minority groups, either utilising the same model possibly supplementing this progress with more of Edgar's (1999) broad ranging, progressive concepts and ideas, particularly those aimed at improving social inclusion and the vocational focus of schools.

There are many specific and practical possibilities for research arising from this research. For example:

- Application of the *Sikavni* model to traditional Australian 'Ethnic Schools' (using the definition in Chapter 6, p. 185), thereby expanding their roles;

- Application of the *Sikavni*-Open Access partnership model by other ethnic minority groups and mainstream groups;
- Flexible and mixed modes of delivering education to children (regardless of ethnicity) who do not fit with what is perceived to be the mainstream model of schooling;
- Investigating models of parental and community influence over the curriculum, particularly with regard to cultural education and vocational training, using the *Sikavni* model of involving the *Kris* as a prototype;
- Considering the contribution made by this research to the definition and structure of alternative schools and further investigation of combinations of alternative education in mainstream schools; and
- Extension of the *Sikavni* model along the lines of Edgar's (1999) expansion to include a wider range of community services and networks.

The quote below captures the essence of what I believe are the underpinning philosophies to Australia's future in education:

> ... Choice in schooling is vital if we are to freely express the philosophical, cultural and religious diversity that enriches our society and underpins democratic way of life.
>
> While Australians respect the right of the individual, as a nation we are also concerned with social unity. There is a difference, however, between social unity that is achieved through diversity and that which is imposed by uniformity.
>
> (National Council of Independent Schools' Association 2002: 4)

Capitalising on this concept, future research arising from the outcomes of this work could be focused on the celebration of diversity and ways of improving literacy and educational outcomes whilst looking at other alternative options for schooling. Another

aim of future research could include applying similar principles and broadening the scope of this project to include children who are not from an ethnic minority. That is, strategies for any children who are not currently adapting well to mainstream schooling.

In hindsight, given the nature of the Australian education environment, the *Sikavni* is possibly heralding the beginning of a change in attitude towards education, if not schooling, but it remains to be seen if it is the only path that can be taken. Despite not being a reality at this point in time, it remains a possibility that some of the children may successfully make the transition to mainstream schools. A longitudinal study of the children would bear out this assertion.

FUTURE NEEDS AND APPLICABILITY

One of the underlying themes of this thesis has been the concept that schooling and education should have separate identities. They have unique roles within society and whilst they often work well together, they should not be seen as inseparable. Collaborative partnerships between government and communities could provide real choice in schooling, not dissimilar to Illich's de-schooling ideals, but more regulated and ultimately more controllable in the achieving of quality outcomes. The *Sikavni* shows that even though current practice is that alternative education is traditionally provided in non-government schools, mainstream and alternative can be effectively integrated. Utilising the resources of the open access system (a mainstream educational institution) has proved to be a key feature in the success of the *Sikavni*; primarily, but not solely due to the quality of both the teaching staff and teaching materials. This has in fact, assured the quality of the teaching and learning process and allowed that the

community focuses its energies on what it does best – imparting knowledge and understanding of Romani values, traditions and culture – again lending support to Edgar's ideas.

If alternative education is indeed based upon the belief that all people can be educated (Morley 1991), then the *Sikavni* has proven this to be true through its success with children who had previously accessed very little education or schooling. Being part of a minority group struggling to come to terms with education and its institutions means coming to terms with being different. Do I try to fit in and pretend that I am just like all of them? Or, accept that I am different and pretend I just don't care? Whilst it could not be hoped that every person reading this thesis will arrive at the same conclusions as I have, it is hoped that the elucidation of data and its presentation based on the understandings, interpretations and assumptions of a member of a minority group will bring new understandings to a field (broadly described as education) characterised by mainstream values and interpretations of minority actions.

Several of Edgar's (1999) options as a model of an integrated system fit the *Sikavni* already. The most important distinction between the *Sikavni* and alternative schools is the reliance of the *Sikavni* on the mainstream system. But whilst there is reliance on certain aspects, it is the building of specialised skill formation into the rest of the curriculum that separates the *Sikavni* from mainstream schools. The course of the study included investigation of the viability of alternatives to the mainstream schooling system for Australian Roma. It is argued that the mainstream education system, perhaps inadvertently, discriminates against the Roma mainly because of compulsory school

attendance requirements, but also by other ethnicity-related factors including requirements of cultural maintenance such as *marimé*.[2] This institutionalised racism:

> refers to a pattern of distribution of social goods including power, which regularly and systematically advantages some ethnic and racial groups and disadvantages others. It operates through key institutions against social arrangements through which social goods and services are distributed. These include the public service, the legal and medical system and the education system.
>
> (Pettman 1986: 7)

Discrimination is maintained by perpetuating these institutionalised practices and a cycle of ingrained discrimination is created. Accepting that changes to the system in Australia would require fundamental shifts in government position means that proposals for fulfilment of the needs of the Roma must be within the context of current Australian Government policies.

Given the problems of illiteracy amongst Roma in Australia and the lack of interest in participating in mainstream education, it is suggested that mainstream educational services that do not provide for the needs of the Romani children. Speculation as to whether this study would uncover one or more solutions that would be more successful than those trialled in Europe and the United States provided stimulus for this study. This study uncovers solutions that would also be applicable to Western Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States. These solutions could be more successful than those strategies currently being employed.

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[2] *Marimé* is a concept of moral and physical pollution versus cleanliness and purity. Fuller definition in the context of this study is also provided later in this chapter. Discussion of its implication for education is provided in Morrow (1998: 35-39). Weyrauch & Bell (2001: 27-39) also provides a discussion of *marimé* in an American legal context.

Illiteracy is an international, Australian and a Roma issue. In looking at illiteracy amongst the Roma in Australia, it is important to understand how illiteracy impacts on the Western World and the Roma in this context. Although illiteracy can be considered to be a separate issue to education, it remains one of the main reasons underpinning my argument that improvements in mainstream education are important. Even assuming that not all Roma are illiterate[3], it is a possibility that up to two per cent of the 460 million illiterate people quoted by UNESCO (1966 quoted in Coombs 1968: 3) were Roma:

> In the early 1950s, educational systems the world over began a process of expansion without precedent in human history. Student enrolments more than doubled in many places, expenditures on education rose at an even faster rate, and education emerged as the latest local industry ... Despite this great educational expansion, a parallel population growth has led to an increase in the aggregate number of adult illiterates in the world. The figure for UNESCO's member states currently exceeds 460 million illiterate adults, or almost 60 per cent of their active population.
>
> UNESCO (1966 quoted in Coombs 1968: 3)

By the year 2000, this figure had risen:

> ... to an estimated 880 million adults who cannot read nor write in the world; two-thirds of whom are women. Many children won't learn to read and write in school - as an estimated 113 million children of primary school-age are not attending. And many more children drop out or complete school without even learning to read or write.
>
> (Lievesley & Motivans 2000)

My belief is that education is crucial to improving the life chances of Roma worldwide and will combat the ever-growing illiteracy of Roma in the Western World. In order to do this, we must look at the causes of illiteracy. One diagnosis of the 'problem' for the

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[3] Estimates as to the number of Roma world wide vary wildly. Liégeois (1986: 47) estimates that there may be 12 to 15 million Roma in Europe. Courbet (1999) estimates 12 million world-wide.

Romani community in the United States is that they are using their illiteracy as a mechanism to protect their culture, to ensure that future generations remain true to their heritage:

> It is plain that the integrity of the American Romani Community is maintained in great part, by severely circumscribing the options of the individual Rom. It goes without saying, however, that any socialized member of a Romani community does not himself feel oppressed or deprived by his lack of reading and writing ability – rather he feels 'liberated' from the 'craziness' of the gadjo community, much of which he ascribes to reading and writing.
>
> (Hancock 1999: 5)

Other causes range from 'not wanting to participate' characterised by statements such as 'we don't need it, there's no value in it' to 'wanting to participate but not having the access, funds or ability to get children into school'. This last can be caused by either lack of schools (in under-developed countries such as Albania or India) or lack of available places in schools (in developed countries such as the United Kingdom).

In Australia, social conditions are different for Roma than in many other countries. This is explored further in chapter 4, but sets the scene for considerations such as identity, cultural pluralism and bridging cultures. The lack of *mahala*, or 'Gypsy Quarters' means that there is often a lack of social identity of the young as Roma and so the parents in an attempt to compensate for this, hold closely to traditions and customs long since discarded in other countries. To ensure that racial/cultural identity is not lost for the next generation, many parents are choosing not to allow their children to enter mainstream educational institutions despite this being both mandatory and often the only viable option.

Notwithstanding the overall excellence of Australian schooling, the quality of which is not under investigation, already existing educational programs, particularly those with a focus on improving access and equity, have been found wanting. While a wide range of school-level initiatives have been supported, it seems that few appear to have tackled the issues from a national policy perspective. Through the *Sikavni*, the Romani community has been able to implement some of Morrow's (1998) 'Strategies for the Roma to Help Themselves' to facilitate their access to education. In the big picture, this is yet another small 'project' that has enabled one community to turn its thoughts into action. However, as acknowledged below, on its own, it can only provide a band-aid solution to a global problem. Keeffe (1972: 170-173) identified similar problems in relation to the management of educational funding for Australian Aboriginal people in Australia:

> Commonwealth funds have been distributed on a submission-based process that is both inefficient in terms of resource input and ineffective in terms of the educational outcomes that result. The submission mode supports the already established, namely those with access to information power and the resources necessary for writing submissions that can obtain more resources. Such an unplanned funding mode also results in short-term planning, localised low-impact spending, based on ad hoc, bandaid approaches and a resultant lessening in the quality of educational processes. Inequality becomes entrenched and systematically reproduced.

As a model therefore, the *Sikavni* provides a prototype, but to secure future educational surety, models such as this could be more globally applied. Solutions that develop such 'communitarian' schools that 'allow young people access to enough western cultural capital to survive in a world dominated by western ideas, but which continue to nurture minority cultures,' need to be universally promoted (Keeffe 1972: 170). Edgar's (1999) ideas, as stated in Appendix 6, do not call for the end of 'schools' in their current form

and neither does the *Sikavni* purport to be a 'school' to be used in place of other schools. Rather, these alternative forms build on the concept of the school building stronger community (and industry) links, thereby broadening the capacity of schools to provide students with the cultural capital they need to contribute effectively to Australia's multicultural mainstream society; to provide a truly multicultural education, one that,

> ... values cultural pluralism. Multicultural education rejects the view that schools should seek to melt away cultural pluralism. Instead, multicultural education affirms that schools should be oriented towards the cultural enrichment of all children and youth through programs rooted to the preservation and extension of cultural alternatives.
>
> (Banya 1993: 2-3)

In the Australian environment, using these arguments, community-based institutions reliant on mainstream constructs, such as the *Sikavni*, are arguably amongst the suitable options to ensure future educational surety for Australians regardless of their ethnicity or cultural heritage.

In conclusion, it is evident that not all schools are failing all Romani students, but rather, not all schools are helping all these students to succeed. Particularly given that society is actually based on a substantial number of different ethnic groups and their cultures in Australia, traditional mainstream schooling is no longer the answer. Success of the Romani *Sikavni* only came about by its leaders working tirelessly with the community and engaging in culturally appropriate education within and augmenting mainstream structures. The challenge then, is for the education system and the rest of the community to take this initiative, broaden its scope and create new mainstream options to serve more effectively its diverse educational clientele.