

Claire Guerin-Lesueur

When school comes to  
the children

## Introduction

Starting in 1980, seven Brothers and some eighty lay persons decided on a social, educational, pedagogic action towards a population which is very marginalised in France: the Gypsies, the Manouches, the Tsiganes and the Roms.

These people, called the Travelling People, have a strong nomadic tradition and resist settling in one place; for centuries they have refused, pure and simple, integration into French society. They therefore refuse the method of integration par excellence, the school.

Lasallians have taken this refusal into account. They have thought up another way. Since the Gypsies don't come to school, the school will go to them. Quite simply. And taking into account their way of life: the family caravan, the specific halting sites, the movement... but also their wish to read the Bible, to write, to find their way through the administration jungle, to learn to drive, to talk to settle people... to get rid of old reciprocal fears.

A beautiful adventure with a special people. Exciting. Difficult.

But a beautiful adventure which raises again a serious question: What is the role of education?

- to preserve cultures? How? To what extent?
- to help social integration? How far? Why?
- Integration? Assimilation?

Claire Guerin-Lesueur, mother of two young children, has devoted the first 12 years of her professional life to the children of the

Travelling People. She has agreed to share with us here her educational experiences. She plunges us into a little-known world which is that of the very poor. She makes us love it.

Through her account there emerges a way of listening, of being with, of giving a respectful and adapted service. We find here a Lasallian way of living the education mission today.

This witness is offered to us so that the look which we cast - personally or collectively - at our educational reality - is sharpened and enriched.

**Thanks, Claire.**

Br.Nicolas Capelle

It's now 12 years since I started out on this adventure with the itinerants in the department of Val d'Oise as a teacher working for the A.S.E.T.<sup>1</sup> This professional commitment has been for me a real period of learning: **Meeting, Listening, Taking A Risk**, working with people very much on the fringe of society.

Every time I returned from the gypsy camp-sites to the comfort of life in Paris I couldn't help seeing, hearing and being aware that, all around us, there are other people who are poor and unable to make their voices heard. In the pages that follow, I shall try to describe my experience as clearly as I can.<sup>2</sup>

**Meeting:** The aim of chapter 1 is to describe a number of families I met and got to know over a period of 12 years. My aim is to preserve their memory, express my respect and friendship for them, and to stress that the most important aspect of this experience was the relationship that was established and maintained.

My aim in describing all these people is to give them their dignity, and to make the reader of these lines respect them and say nothing, avoiding hasty conclusions and generalisations, simply making space for these lives which taught and gave me so much. Each of these persons is described as I saw them.

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<sup>1</sup>A.S.E.T: Association for the Schooling of gypsy children and other young people in difficulty. Appendix 2 describes the Association.

<sup>2</sup>This text is based on a 120 page document in which I describe my professional experiences as part of A.S.E.T: For further information contact me: Claire Lesueur, Routes des Félines, 26160 Pont De Barret.

The reader should beware of seeing or of introducing into the text feelings which are not mine: those of preference or judgment. We should not forget that the Manouche and gypsies are not the same as we are, and that sometimes what we consider to be negative is not so for them. In the course of these pages, the reader can follow the various stages through which each of the families described passed, and which made each one different, unique. But there are also characteristics they share: a fierce independence we can never understand, and the beauty of their day-to-day courage.

**Listening:** Chapter 2 describes the educational and pedagogical work done among these people.

**Taking A Risk:** This last chapter speaks of this professional option in terms of taking a risk which entails certain essential conditions if this meeting and therefore this work is to be successful.

## Meet

### *Tilite, the solitude.*

I remember a telephone call from a young itinerant woman, a friend of Tilite, one Sunday evening at about 11 o'clock, just after Tilite had given birth to Mellie. Those who had brought the two women to the hospital when the birth process had got under way, had forgotten to return to pick up Marie who couldn't sleep there. And so I had gone to take her home, leaving Tilite alone with her new baby. On the other hand, she has already six children: four boys and two girls: Tinin, Tintin, Concoinc, Tutus, Nounouille and Fifi.

After this first meeting with Tilite and her children, I tried to see her each time, to consolidate as best as I could the work with the children, to build up trust.

There were noticeable changes in Tilite's attitudes and plans. These changes could be seen mainly in her choice of camp-sites over the years.

### **Painful camp-sites, part of a large group.**

For several years, I found Tilite mixed in with a big group of Manouche, all cousins by marriage, weighed down by difficulties of all kinds: health, work, money, camp life, schooling.

In this same group there was also Toute, her sister. I always found Tilite sad and bitter towards the others who despised her, and took advantage of her by taking her social welfare money from her. I was often shocked by the lack of solidarity among the families. You'd think they'd help one another, and then you find that nobody wants to drop Tilite off at the Post Office so that she can withdraw her money, nor make room for her in a lorry so that she can go shopping or to the laundrette.

And so I found Tilite in a former housing estate for factory workers where, without a penny to her name and lacking the energy to take her children in hand, she let them beg here and there for the odd ten franc coin. Tutus had even managed to distract the attention of a Portuguese women on her way back from her pitiful

shopping to steal her shopping bag and the bicycle of her son.

One evening, Tilite, who had just received a large sum of money after the adjustment of her allowance, was robbed by her relatives of the nice round sum of 30,000 francs. This event woke her up to the reality of her situation and the attitude of her relatives towards her. Little by little she broke away from them.

She went to live close to her sister who squatted in a small gardening allotment. She herself took over the neighbouring strip of land. There was a small concrete hut on it, barely 50 square metres big, which had been abandoned. Tilite did it up: curtains on the windows, a table, a sofa, chairs, a cooking stove - all rescued here and there. It was enough to give her a zest for living. Each day, Tilite cooked vegetables and soups for the children and made the little hut pretty. Tilite expressed in this way something of a deep desire which gave her dignity and made her happy: to have a small piece of land and a little house of her own in which to live peacefully.

This simple day to day happiness was destroyed when her nephews, taking advantage of her absence, broke into the hut and set fire to it. That day, Tilite finally understood that she had nothing in common with those who hurt her so much.

### **Living apart with another lonely woman.**

When it came to suffering, Tilite preferred loneliness to contempt. And so she went to live in a dark factory yard with Nonone, another woman living alone with her 5 children. Both had taken steps to obtain permission from the town authorities to stay there. You really had to know the place to find it! On the banks of the Seine, a big gate opened onto a miserable courtyard in which there were old buildings, some of which were abandoned. Tilite said: *"I'm afraid people will complain about us."* I came to this place regularly. Never abandon the most lonely, the most poor, is another message I have received from this work.

One day, I found the courtyard empty behind its big gate. I wandered about in the streets in the same factory area, and my eyes and my instincts led me to another yard. Climbing up on top of the wall to have a look inside, I recognised Tilite's face: she was bent over a scrap-metal fire.

Tilite and her children were living then with Fernande. Fernande lived alone with her son, renting a hut in the factory in exchange for watching over the property. These two women bravely set to work to feed their children and pay the rent. It was hard work, men's work: they collected scrap metal and burnt it before delivering it. Coincidentally, Tutus and Fernande's son help with this work. *"You have to eat, you have to work,"* Tilite tells me.

During all this time, Nounouille looks after the youngest children in this cold and damp building, where so many people have found shelter, but where now Fernande's humanity has led her to share her roof.

This is an important stage in the life of Tilite. She finds she now has more energy; she has become more aware, confident she can succeed. The example of Fernande - fraternal, energetic, getting up each morning to work - has certainly something to do with it. This stage proved to be short, but a turning point. Coming back one day, I found the gate padlocked and the court empty.

### **Living with personal plans.**

Subsequently, Tilite lived either alone or with other families, but from now on, always armed with a tenacious will and pride. During this period she made plans: to find a piece of land, rent a small house, move away from those who prevent her from living, organise her life differently, offer her children some comfort, such as running water, a shower, somewhere warm, regular schooling.

One day, on a piece of land given over to trail-bike riding where she had been living for some months, a fire destroyed her little "kitchen-caravan" and damaged extensively her "sleeping-caravan." Tutus, who was supposed to be looking after the place on one wet and rainy autumn afternoon, had filled the little wood stove to capacity, to the point it caused a fire. Fortunately, no one was hurt. The police and the fireman arrived and noted the serious damage and, in particular, the promiscuity in which this family of 6 persons would now have to live. This did not worry anyone in particular. The police and firemen went off leaving Tilite to collect the still warm remains, fix up her door and windows with material, planks and cardboard, and get on with her life. When I visited Tilite a few days after this disaster, I was struck by her courage, and by the fact that this event had not overwhelmed her

particularly. Previously, this misfortune would have destroyed her, turned her in on herself, drowned her in her sadness; it would have made her snap at the least disturbance of her children, and count entirely on outside help.

When I spoke to her, I understood the source of this strength. I discovered her secret : *"Don't tell any one, it'll make them jealous, but, he's come back."* The "he" was her husband Louis. Her life now had some meaning. The children change physically and socially: they open up and seem finally happy and peaceful. The return of Louis strengthens the plans of the family to be autonomous.

A few months later, they went to live on the side of a field near a ranch. Initially, they were surrounded by other families, but then all left leaving Tilite alone, and she was quite happy about this... In fact, when the site had become unhealthy and unusable, the other families had left, complaining there was too much mud and rubbish.

Tilite and her family made a different choice: that of cleaning the place completely, and of taking it over as a place to stay. This choice to clean up the rubbish of others is rare among itinerants. In general, they clean up their own area, for themselves, never for others; and at the same time they never reprimand other people for breaking, looting or not respecting things. The whole family took part in cleaning up the site. To protect their privacy, Louis and his sons went out to collect some building site refuse which they dumped here and there on the site to prevent others from parking their caravans there.

But the world around them is hostile: the owners of the land will take advantage of the isolation of the family to force it to leave, without forgetting to take them to court first!

### ***Nanou***

The fourth boy of a gypsy family made of six children (five boys and a girl). He is striking for his clear-thinking about his situation, his aspirations and his ambitions. He can read and write. He is perfectly aware of the sometimes passive attitude which prevents his mother from reacting against her distressful situation, and he knows how to remedy this: by working regularly, doing what is promised, stopping the habit of relying on social security. But at

the same time, his life is lived out mostly in this atmosphere of passivity to which he is quite accustomed. He is the first of our adolescent pupils from our mobile classrooms to have gone to a school: the Oscar Romero School<sup>3</sup>. He was immediately offered the chance of work experience. Nanou dreamed of training to be a baker. And there he is at a bakery. The transition was an impossible one between his life and this professional work (or even between his life and any professional constraint at all). He couldn't get up on time in the morning, arrived at the baker's at 10 o'clock each morning, and couldn't bear with the baker reprimanding him for his late-coming. It was not long before he stopped going to the place of his work experience, and stopped going to school also.

Returning home, he sometimes lives with his father, sometimes with his mother. His father gives him the means to take his driving test. This gives him an incentive to work. He goes here and there with his father, his brother Lolo and his uncle Jean. He also finds means of making money on the side. It was then that he met Sandra, a young Malagasy girl with a fixed address, who had her baccalaureat and was already working. They had two children and Nanou began a life with a fixed address: a flat, a creche and Sandra's regular work. What happened next? Sandra soon got fed up with Nanou's attitude: he was perfectly happy to be supported. As for Nanou, he accused her of listening to her mother who never stopped putting him down. And then, Sandra went off with another man.

Nanou returned to his mother, sad and in a violent mood. He blamed everybody, and went driving at breakneck speed along waste-land tracks. His two children give him back a taste for living. Very much attached to them, he did everything to see them and have custody of them. His attempts were finally successful. Later, he went to live with Lola, one of his cousins. She already had two children each one from a different father, both of whom had left. This arrangement didn't last long. Nanou spoke of this cohabitation only in terms of financial benefits: "*With Lola, you get a family allowance and a single parent allowance*".

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<sup>3</sup> The Oscar Romero School is a small-scale scheme which helps children to catch up to the necessary level in their studies, and which offers job counselling to youngsters who have abandoned their schooling. It was created by the Brothers.

Will Nanou find his feet one day? Will he ever manage to cope with the constraints of life, of a job? There's such a gap between what he says, his bouts of lucidity and his attitudes. Each time, following some failure, he goes back to his mother or stays some time with his father.

### ***Catana***

My meeting with Catana, Nanou's sister, gave me the hope that here at last there was a chance of breaking free, or at least that a breach had been made in this hermetically sealed cultural and ethnic context.

Catana is the only girl in this family of 5 boys. Her mother, Tchouncho, had lost a child from meningitis about 20 years before. Catana and her brothers and cousins came to my mobile classroom for about a year. With her, I learnt to look beyond her somewhat brutal and provocative adolescent attitude to our relationship; the attitude of a girl who fears no one will see her, no one will listen to her, and no one will understand her. Every time I met her, I had to recreate our relationship, breaking through the brusqueness of the initial contact which was always there. With time, we began talking and I learnt about her day-to-day life: serving her mother and her brothers, fitting in with the expectations of her environment. Her environment consists of her brothers, her gypsy maternal grandparents and, under their influence, her mother. A daughter must serve in the caravan then marry a gypsy, make no plans for an emancipated life, not overtake her brothers by her knowledge and initiatives, preserve gypsy traditions. Catana shared her dreams and her desires with me: to go school and to hear her favourite singer perform.

I then suggested to Catana to attend the Oscar Romero School, a small set-up for young people with very great social and school-learning difficulties. I had made the same suggestion to Nanou. At this time, Catana was 16 years' old. Her mother agreed immediately, ignoring the objections of her sons and relatives who were not happy at all with her going to school: what was their sister going to do at school? Wasn't she too old for it? For them, there were more risks than advantages in her going to school: there was no one in the caravan to help their mother with the household chores; it was a threat to gypsy customs and traditions; their would be contact with non-itinerant boys, as well as with a

lifestyle, a way of thinking and choosing that was fundamentally different. Despite all this, Catana went to the Oscar Romero school. She spent about three years there, which were three years in which she opened up, met people, came into contact with adults who opened her mind to other projects. She couldn't read fluently at the end of those three years, but she had taken the risk of making personal choices and to have personal experiences: courses, discovery trips in Holland, writing texts and personal thoughts thanks to the writing workshop included in the French language course.

In what sense was Catana's schooling a success? It certainly was in the sense that she opened up and learnt to express herself. Catana did "hands-on" courses in subjects she was interested in: hairdressing, catering, hotel work. She soon got to know the human side of our society: its respect and encouragement, but also its exploitation and humiliation. But her fierce independence as a gypsy girl made her react vigorously when she was subjected to humiliation... She got angry and walked out. Finally, age and traditions brought Catana back home. Perhaps things would have been different if one of her courses had led to a job. The importance of this short period in society is that it remains in the mind; there remains the path to freedom she followed and made part of her life and which she will hand on to her children. Once again, we have here the mystery of something suggested one day, a seed sown...

### ***The Renard Family***

My first memory is that of a big fire one January evening after class. On that cold winter evening, warming myself at the fire before setting out again the road was not an invitation I could refuse. A mother shouted over to me in such a friendly way "*Do you want a beer*", that I stayed. That day, everyone was rejoicing: Poussin, the eldest of the boys had just got out of prison, imposed as a result of some shady affair.

My second memory is of quite a fierce argument with Mona, one of the girls of this family in the mobile classroom. This episode took place a few days after the evening spent by the fireside. I was absorbed in my work with a girl who was quite gifted academically, when Mona, who up to that moment had insisted on doing

what she wanted, shouted to me: "*You going to give time to us or what? We exist also, you know!*" I was moved deeply by these words, and I turned towards Mona and her brothers and sisters whom I suddenly saw as the most abandoned, the most difficult to make contact with in this world which is already so poor...

The abandonment was total, the illiteracy absolute, the language very poor and sometimes difficult to understand for an untrained ear, and there were no significant points of reference. That is my real impression of this family, a family I shall always continue to contact and to see. It is a family on the lowest rung of itinerant life and misery. It was then that I realised that Mona's appeal was an all-enveloping one calling for a total presence.

The Renard family has always lived on wild waste land, isolated from other itinerants. As soon as it can find a little isolated spot, it moves onto it. The schooling of their children, all grown-up now, was sporadic. The older ones sometimes went to school, but with no success, since none of them can read. The youngest, starting with Mona, attended the mobile classrooms intermittently.

My relationship with the Renard family is a meeting which lasted 12 years, a relationship pursued from year to year, sometimes interrupted by change of camp site. It was in fact with this family that I learnt the fundamental elements of friendship and the importance of differences. This friendship which has defied the years makes Garçonnet say when I meet her and every time I introduce someone to her: "*Daughter, how long is it we've known each other now? You know, I think of you a bit as my daughter... Have I ever shown disrespect to you in all the time I've known you? We go back some way, Daughter, don't we!*" I have always accepted in all simplicity these marks of affection, because I know they are genuine, and that the friendship on my part is fully reciprocal. Yes, we go back a long way together, and it is from this family that I have learnt most about the itinerants, and to it I owe the profound changes in myself that have come about in the course of these years - in other words - the few steps that I have made in my own life towards a more profound freedom and greater humanity.

This family continues to live its precarious and chaotic life, subject to regular expulsion from sites ranging from little pieces of land to parking lots. The following is what I said about this

towards the end of my diary:

*"The man has eyes that never stay still. He looks for ways of keeping his head high. What makes a man keep his head high? His strength, his clear-thinking to help those who trip and fall. His word, his dignity because he has something to say, something to do. A child fell into the Seine today. Neither the fireman nor the police could do anything. He was the one who dived into the water after the child. He couldn't do anything either.*

*The woman has a body which can no longer support her. Around her head there's a bandage soaked in vinegar to calm her everlasting migraine. Her legs give way suddenly and she falls. There's no strength left in her arms and back. They are veined with the blue of a blood that can do no more for her. She has stopped being a mother. She weeps over her sad state, she holds her grandson desperately in her arms as if to ensure she won't lose him. He has his life in front of him. She holds him so tightly that he pushes her away. She is frightened. Fear of leaving. Fear of healing. Fear of looking after herself. Fear of dying.*

*"What makes men and women hold their head high?*

*Some memories from the past when it was possible to earn money and to eat each evening. Harvest work - there was some friendship, a sense of celebration and dignity about this hard daily work.*

*"What makes men and women hold their head high?*

*Love that braves the wind of misery that rages in their small caravan. Some more things they said: "You're soaking my wife with your vinegar!"*

*"She's stubborn, she doesn't want to look after herself. If you only knew how I get after her!"*

*"What makes men and women hold their head high?*

*A crucifix dominates, carefully tied to the window. You turn towards it so that it can witness all that is done and said. And then, a glass of wine, a bottle. Silence then descends on the head and the body as if to put an end to the suffering."*

## **For sharing**

In the account you have just read:

1. How would you describe the type of listening used by the Educator?
2. What does she teach us about listening to the very poor?

## Listen: ...and the school comes to the children

The A.S.E.T. mobile classrooms were created to provide literacy courses for a great many gypsy children outside of a school context. When I began working in 1985, it was said there were some 2,000 children in the North of Paris who never went to school.

That same year, I had the strange feeling I was entering unexplored territory, some 30 minutes by train from central Paris stations. For me, arriving in gypsy territory was like entering the Far West... I still recall those lively looks, the eagerness to meet me, the wild and uncombed hair, the bare feet and the clothes that were too large, and the wonderful rush to get into the mobile classroom.

One day, some parents spoke to an interested and sympathetic Brother Leon Cote about starting up a school for their children. They saw this school as different from those that they had sometimes known and which had left them with the common and bitter memories of sitting all alone at the back of a classroom. They wanted a school where you could go without being afraid, and without being ashamed because you didn't have good shoes or clothes.

And so the idea first raised by these parents evolved: **if the children didn't go to school, the school would come to them.** It would be a school to give instruction, to promote socialisation, a school for learning to read and write. Movement, going somewhere to meet, learn to make acquaintance, to find the means of teaching those one met.

Very quickly another aim surfaced: to serve groups which were most deprived socially, culturally and materially.

### Basic ad hoc pedagogy based on listening to those who come

- Choosing the most deprived in an already marginalised population

Most of my work was done with deprived families living on wild waste-ground, in large family clans or sometimes with just two or three other caravans on some small isolated plot of land.

These families had all kinds of difficulties: precarious situation, lack of organised relations between the group and the town where they settled, fear and problems dealing with administrative authorities, lack of health care, etc. When we refer to them, we call them "Buissonniers" (hedge folk), that is, families of "Manouche" origin, who live in the fields and woods they can still find in this area.

When we visit them on winter mornings, we have to go through immense puddles of water, and go round, as best we can, vast stretches of mud. All the while, an unimpeded wind freezes our whole body. Most of the time, nothing and no one stirs, and when you arrive, you could get the impression the place was completely deserted. And yet, just in the clan we are describing, there are more than 70 children between the ages of 3 and 18. Only a few grandparents who have got up early greet us from the doors of their caravans or from the wheel of their lorry. With them we have a cup of hot coffee, a sign of acceptance and trust, an opportunity to know one another better, to speak about worries, about a form to fill in, about an answer that is long in coming, or simply about life. Most of the time we talk about the state of their camping site. In summer, they like this outdoor life, and they get used to fetching their water each morning; but in the winter, with their feet deep in mud, this becomes too hard. Often, these old people talk about the past, and you realise that in the course of all those years, despite some evolution in social and political thinking, their conditions have not improved at all. One could say, they have tended to become more difficult. Sites are becoming more and more rare, the attitude of the people remains as hostile as ever and, in the suburban towns of Paris, they meet rejection and racism more and more frequently. Administrative services, snowed under by requests, make errors that take a long time to correct, especially when they affect illiterate families. Moreover, the compartmentalisation of services is of no help at all to the most deprived people in their efforts to achieve independence and to leave their destitution behind.

Quite often at the end of our chat, a child pokes his head through

the door of the caravan to find out what's going on. This the signal to gather them together. A short tour of the site with the children who are awake makes us realise already to some degree what obstacles these families have to overcome. The caravans have all lost their heat because of the wind during the night. Sometimes, the gas containers are full, and it doesn't take long to warm up the caravans enough for people to want to get up. Often, however, by the time the 20th of the month has come and gone, lack of funds means the containers are empty. Some remedy this situation by making a hole in the roof and installing a wood-burning stove which they keep going with whatever they can find: crates, pallets, brush wood, logs. They have the advantage of being able to heat their caravan throughout the winter, but there are problems and sometimes disasters. Caravans altered in this way are impossible to sell; and accidents due to the stove are innumerable: children and adults scalded by water heating on the stove; or caravans catch fire because the stove has overheated, having been stoked up too much.

This morning waking up process varies in length. Sometimes, the children are waiting outside the mobile classroom 15 minutes after I arrive. Sometimes it takes longer; and sometimes no one turns up. There are various explanations for this: speed often has to do with lack of food: the child jumps out of his bunk and he's there, ready. Sometimes he's attracted by the warmth of the classroom which I made sure was warmed up on my way there. If the child takes longer to come, it's probably because he's found something to eat, or because he can't find any dry clothes, or dry shoes. And so, sometimes he turns up in clothes too large for him, wearing someone else's shoes, or sometimes even barefooted. Sometimes, he doesn't appear at all. In such cases, I have always been discreet, accepting the secret, or the shame, or the dignity hidden behind the reasons for this absence: unwillingness to appear badly or skimpily dressed; the fatigue and lack of will to get up on a cold winter's morning, with an empty stomach, in order to go and try to pay attention; the departure of the boys with their fathers to go to work and perhaps earn a bit more money to come back with some food; or the girls are asked by their mother to help tidy up the caravan and look after the smaller children.

Sometimes when we arrive, the site is a battlefield - the itinerants

have either gone or they're in the process of being ejected. Everybody is awake. Men and boys are hitching up the caravans, the women and girls are tidying up the caravan and doing the washing up. The youngest children wander around somewhat excited in all this confusion. When this ejection takes place in winter, it has a bitter taste of uncertainty, rejection, a taste of the indifference of society regarding itinerants. "We don't mind going, but where?"

The best time, of course, is the summer when long and fine days recall the days of the horse-drawn caravans, large meadows. In summer, stopping in a field is welcomed because of the possibility of some shade and cool air. For, if caravans are ice-boxes in winter if there's no heating; in summer, they are unbearable when they are parked on asphalted sites and without shade. The summer is the time you'll see meals by the fireside, people telling stories, playing the guitar, children playing, good humour all round.

- **Regular sessions over a period of time**

It took more than a whole school year of **regular attendance** to accustom the children to settle down and be prepared to learn. At the beginning, they were incapable of staying in their place, of keeping silence, of understanding why they were there, of respecting the wishes of others and the constraints of living as a group. They had no respect for the mobile classroom and for what was in it. Normal behaviour included carrying off pencils and felt-tips, hidden in their socks; eating rubbers; tearing up their work; attacking their neighbour for no apparent reason, leaving the classroom and wanting to return without saying anything, never finishing work they began, and refusing outright to try to do something by themselves. They never stopped calling out to me, pulling at my sleeve so that I would give them my whole attention, got angry when I insisted they listen, wait or do their work alone.

It was all very exhausting. And you have to add to that the frequent visits of the adults or older children who came knocking on the door, just to see what was going on, to get warm, to insist we accepted a very small child they didn't want to look after, or to get us to fill in an official form for them.

Sometimes they came wanting one of their girls to look after a

younger child or do the house cleaning in their absence. I found it very difficult to understand and accept this.

Sometimes they dragged a child away who was engrossed and captivated by his work because they were going out shopping or to visit some cousins.

In this kind of context, the thought of walking out or coming less frequently was never far from our minds. And yet, it was exactly the opposite that, one day, my two colleagues and I chose to do. We decided **to come at least two half-days per week, come with three classrooms so as to cater to all ages - young, middling and adults**, and agree among ourselves to take the same group always, to encourage the children to attend their own group, avoiding any picking-and-choosing, and explaining to the children the need to remain in age groups so as to learn better. Little by little the constraints began to make sense. Some children began to succeed and to make progress. Having accepted these basic rules, they insisted others respect them also; and having tasted success, they imposed the idea of wanting to learn on their families, refusing, for example, to go shopping with them so as to stay in the classroom. The families, for their part, changed their attitude; from initially keeping aloof and not cooperating with what was going on in the classroom, they came to respect it, agreeing to put off shopping to another time, or entrusting their youngest child to another family if the child was late returning from the classroom. And the adults told the little children not to disturb their elders.

After almost a year and a half of these regular sessions over a period of time, certain families expressed the wish that this work should continue, and observed that the children learn more in this way. We noted, in fact, that they were now able to organise themselves, to use the material at their disposal and to respect it, to tidy things up with giving way to the temptation of pilfering it. They were all now capable, even the most difficult ones, of completing their chosen piece of work, and most of them were beginning to read simple words and sentences. On our part, we could now organise outings with the children.

- **The choice of simple teaching methods in which progress is easy to measure**

The work we are going to describe takes place in mobile class-

rooms parked on waste-ground.

Because of the context, one could expect to find highly innovative and different teaching methods. My approach as a teacher is similar in all points to that of the majority of teachers working with children unable to read. The innovation, which is also the driving force for my work, consists - and I cannot repeat this often enough - **in going to where the children to be taught live.**

Gradually, all the masks fall: the child is invited to learn without having to hide, without pretending to leave outside the classroom what constitutes his life. In this way, he is freed from the worries many children have who go to local schools: never being accepted for what they are, given the great differences between what goes on in the school and what goes on in ordinary life. How can these children learn when they have so many worries which they can't share with anyone; when so many difference bring with them shame? In the mobile classroom, the itinerant child is welcomed with all his life, since teaching is impossible without an all-enveloping relationship with the child's family.

There are some initial basic requirements in order that the children can learn:

- Build and structure the group to establish understanding.
- Build up and increase a stock of vocabulary to create a common semantic field on which to base reading.
- Create a relationship based on trust, justice, easy humour, which gives everybody a chance and a taste for learning.

In addition, the children must have proof quickly that they are learning, remembering and that they are capable of persevering from session to session. In other words, they have to feel that it's worth coming to the mobile classroom. And so it is important to use an approach they can relate to and which builds them up.

The feeling of success has much to do with the teacher's approach. As far as I'm concerned, I value any success they have, I make them see what they know, and tell them that the efforts they have made are the key to success. And so, in each session, I tell the children what we are going to learn and why we are going to concentrate on such or such aspect of reading. In addition I work out with them what helped them to find a word or read a sentence.

Setting up a class group involves the acceptance of constraints. This is a very tiring process at the start.

**The constraint of belonging to a group with which they remain** is essential. The children tend to go from one classroom to another, attaching themselves to any adult that takes them in, especially if they have problems.

**The constraint of committing themselves to come and learn at each session.** (Time is decided child by child). In caravans, it's common practice to come in, go out, go and see, but is possible to a much lesser degree in a mobile classroom. Children tend easily to treat the classroom like their own caravans, and are ready to run out for the smallest reason.

Each lesson, therefore, is accompanied by a certain number of common **rituals**:

- going to one's place and sitting down,
- exchanging news - establishing silence, discovering, saying and writing the date on the board, and then listening to what the lesson will be about,
- beginning the reading rituals: revision of words, competition on slates, reading a story and vocabulary, reading a common text and identification of words with pooling of each child's opinion about the meaning,
- working on files (when a child finishes before the others, or if he comes before the others, he rereads texts studied previously).

These rituals are essential for creating the group: they provide basic rules for creating mutual respect and mutual listening. They create a calm atmosphere in the class, and enable me to see quickly at the beginning of each session each child's capacity for listening and absorbing, and what point he has reached in his learning.

When I began working in a mobile classroom, and even after a few years' experience, I used various reading manuals or even literature books for children. None of this was really successful. I eventually adopted the following approach:

- tell, read stories for pleasure, and as time goes on, discover new horizons and new words,

- speak with the children about their life, discuss and list the words of the children,
- these usual words, as well as certain current words found in stories that have been told constitute a fund on which reading will be built.

This fund of words serves as the starting point for reading. On the basis of these words, letters and sounds are learnt, and a word-box for each child is made. This box is open at each session and always added to. It serves for reading games, and a daily reading competition, which maintains a spirit of emulation among the children. Very quickly, it becomes possible to create simple sentences. The first names of children are used as the subject of little texts that are created.

### **Conclusions: in a mobile classroom or a neighbourhood school?**

- **It's not easy!**

It has to be said, some days in the mobile classroom are not easy! Apart from driving the vehicle, the mechanical problems on winter mornings, getting bogged down in the mud on camping sites, we have to cope also with finding the places where the families go when they're expelled, constantly adapt to the changes that occur in groups: arrivals, departures, worries of this or that family. All this inevitably affects our work.

It is necessary also to understand and to fix in our heads and in our attitudes how much our educational work is intimately connected with the bonds we create, with the relationship built up, with the human understanding of those we come to help. It is only then that the purely educational work can begin. This is not easy. It is a fundamental attitude that needs to be communicated to anyone who is prepared to take the risk of doing this work.

- **Success depends on a number of conditions**

Concerning the success of the integration in the school, it depends on the patience of those who deal with the child and on their knowledge of the background situation of the children.

A sense of welcome is as important for the child as for the family. If the family feels it is welcome, it will dare to speak with the

headmistress and the teachers, and the child will feel all the more at his ease because of this.

One of the conditions for a child to fit into a class successfully is the relationship between the child and the teacher, on the one hand, and between the parents and the team of teachers, on the other. Any teacher or head of a school who knows how to approach people, who goes out into the street at the end of school and exchanges a few words with the parents of the children in a natural, positive, friendly way, establishes relationships, without realising perhaps how important what he does is for the successful integration of children in school.

Winning the trust of the adults makes regular attendance and success in school more likely. And then the parents accept school outings, so important in promoting mutual knowledge between teachers and children. School becomes a place where you can have a chance of succeeding, and where you discover new things.

At the opposite end of the scale, too much distance or rigidity on the part of the teacher, a refusal to tolerate a few absences at the beginning, the neglect of child-adult relations, omitting to spend five minutes or so with each child in the class, all this leads very quickly to loss of interest on the part of the itinerant families, and a rapid decrease in attendance.

Another condition which may seem obvious, is the desire for schooling on the part of the parents and of the children themselves, as opposed to a response to pressure from the social services, the education authorities or A.S.E.T. In the latter case, the family is embarrassed; it feels obliged to "please" us, no longer having the freedom to send its children to school or not. It will feel under pressure and the classes will empty quickly.

Whatever the conditions in which the itinerants live, whatever their background, I can state in all certainty that if parents are convinced of the utility of schools, they will support them. They will overcome obstacles which, if we had them in identical circumstances, we would find very difficult to cope with.

- **An example of successful integration:** *the Dhont-Siegler family*

This family belongs to the "hedge-folk" group with whom I have

been working regularly since 1994. Up to June 1997, it moved with cousin families from one piece of waste-land to another in the Val d'Oise area. Expulsion from a site meant they were deprived of access to water, had to use candles for lighting, and suffer from cold, rain and mud during the winter, and a lack of trees and shade in the summer.

The family suffered also from sharing the name and bad reputation of this group. It had a bad reputation. in the eyes of the fixed-domicile gypsies, who thought of the group as savages incapable of mixing with people; in those of richer and better organised itinerants, who considered them as good-for-nothing persons, giving a bad impression of itinerants to fixed-domicile gypsies. Previously, this family had lived on an official site at Sannois, one of the first in the department. Various unresolved difficulties led the town authorities to tell all the families to move out, allowing only old and single persons to stay. And so, thirty or so families found themselves back in the fields after a short attempt to settle down which, despite everything, had brought them many advantages: water, sanitation, proximity of shops, schools, electricity, security, knowing they were no longer at the mercy of authorities who every two weeks expelled them from their current camp site.

We don't know whether this short experience was sufficient to inspire this family with the desire and the will to lead a more structured life and to ensure regular schooling for its children. There is no doubt, however, that this idea took a firm hold in the thinking and organisation of the family and that, once it had returned to waste-land camp sites, the parents continued to take their children to school.

Whether they were five, twenty or thirty kilometres from the school; whether it rained or the sun shone, whether their feet were dry or covered in mud, the parents never failed to take them to school every day.

Of course, during those four years, the three daughters of the family came to our mobile classrooms also, when no car was in running order, or following a number of successive expulsions. But the parents always said they wanted their children to go back as soon as possible to school.

Gradually, given the daily difficulties of their nomadic life, they

finally organised themselves sufficiently to find and to buy a small piece of land. It took four years to prepare for this, to set money aside, find credit, look around for a piece of land they could afford.

They found one eventually at the end of the 1997 school year, near Beauvais, a financially accessible area. They took the major step of leaving the group, took the risk of adopting an unknown way of life without their group. They saw their cousins regularly, but their life was organised on different lines now. I met the mother in December 1997, and she told me how happy she was to have her own land, how her eldest daughter was working very hard; how she got up early every morning to be on time to catch the school bus to go to school every day. She told me about the two younger girls who liked their primary school; about the organisation of her daily life, about her husband's work, their shopping outings, arranged to fit in with their plans.

This example shows that schooling is undertaken and functions because of a number of factors, but that the real driving force is the awareness, the desire and the will of the people themselves. This family had any number of reasons for not being able to send its children to school, but it did so. But the idea to do so grew in the context of a more general choice; from a great tiredness from having to suffer so much from life; from living under the constant threat of expulsion. It was born from the recovery of some dignity.

This choice is that of a more stable life and of personal success: of looking for, finding and organising one's piece of land, instead of waiting for some town council to apply a law no one wants and convince families that one day, thanks to it, they will live better.

Tzigane families must rely only on themselves to fulfil their dream of a permanent site and what goes with it. The Dhont-Siegler family understood this. This example proves also that if an idea is really adopted by a family, they can bring it about themselves. We with our mobile classrooms can do very little.

They go their way, and the presence of mobile classrooms on sites where children have had some schooling does not prevent the schooling of those who go to school, if that is really their choice.

### **For sharing**

1. Facing a special "school" population : what attitudes, means, procedures have been put in place by this Educator?
2. Thinking about the young people you work with (in school or in the neighbourhood), do you think you have adapted as well as you could? Why?

## Take A Risk: ...under what conditions?

- Look and say nothing.

When I began this work, I was fortunate enough to receive some basic hints regarding establishing relations with the itinerants. Here are some of these:

- listen and look at the situations you encounter without seeking to understand them initially, nor to analyse them,
- have the capacity to accept what you confront (which is so different from the way in which we live) as an opportunity for difference, for a friendship.
- write down accurately what the people you meet say, keep notes regularly.

Re-reading my first notes, I find most of these attitudes:

*"Thursday January 3rd:*

*This morning, I began my "training course" with the gypsies with Brother Léon Cote. Much more than a training course: a whole world to discover, to explore, to love... Léon said the following words to me which I bear in mind: "Here, Claire, you've got to see everything and say nothing. Look with love". I am ready.*

*We go off to see family L.: a world apart, a rejected world. Lookouts note whoever approaches them: friends are so rare... Then we leave. The roads are covered with snow. You can just about make out the caravans. You have to know them to know they are there. You need also to know these beings, to love them, to know they exist... Before going back, we pass a Manouche site. The children are warming themselves around a fire.*

*"Thursday January 10th:*

*We have driven most of the morning along tracks and roads. Léon has showed me the multitude of itinerant sites he knows.*

*For the most part, they have too little money today to travel around, but they have a powerful and burning desire to do so. "O.K., we're from France, but above all we're from everywhere*

and from nowhere. We're not from any country!," *MisPre*, an itinerant grandfather often tells us, and he adds: "I'm not going to lock myself up in those rabbit hutches. I prefer jolting planks and the cold air coming in under my door."

*In another family we spoke about "brick and mortar schools". For one of the children it was his nightmare, a world of horror: "I won't go, I won't go, no, I won't go !," he repeated for minutes on end. Why didn't B want to go to school? For an itinerant, always outside, what do these walls, these bells, these rows of desks, these orders to obey immediately represent? And yet if he did accept them, what do those numerous schools represent for him, where the child who doesn't speak well, who is dirty, who understands so little of what is said, and who is relegated to the back of the class? The parents of itinerant children all say: "If our children go to school, it is to learn to read and write. But if your heart can't manage to love him, to hope in him, to make him grow and make progress, I'm withdrawing him from here. If all he does is draw all day, he can do that at home!"*

*"See everything and say nothing."* This was my guiding principle when meeting others: I gave up the idea that I was capable of understanding everything about this different way of living.

On the other hand, this attitude made me totally accepting and helped me avoid the trap of drawing conclusions and making hasty generalisations. When you go to meet families on their camp sites you are immediately struck by their living conditions. *"See everything and say nothing"* obliges us to resist a common temptation: to interfere and say what we think would be a good idea to do or not do. We must never forget we are visiting someone else's house, and we don't know what goes on in our absence. This silence does not mean indifference. It is a way of looking and listening.

When we meet the Tziganes, we need to look also at something else: look behind the barriers and the piles of earth. Our society is good at hiding misery and shame. Looking in this way helps us also to maintain our links after expulsions, to remain watchful regarding what our barricades hide: other families, other instances of rejection. It is a good habit which never fails us.

- **Keep moving in order to understand**

The words I use in my notes reveal also the constant movement of anyone who decides to work with itinerants. It implies other requirements too: flexibility, adaptation, the lively desire to go out to meet people.

This has to be accompanied by the humour and simplicity necessary for establishing a relationship. How many times have I come to see new groups of itinerants, or returned after a long absence! How difficult the initial contact always is! And how that fierce look of the itinerants, a mixture of distrust, shame, thirst for friendship and fidelity, would sometimes makes us want the earth to swallow us up! In the same way, how many mothers have demanded angrily a place in an already crowded classroom, not understanding necessary limits to ensure effective teaching. How essential are patience and humour to listen to what is demanded while explaining what is being done!

Another indispensable attitude towards both children and adults is justice and the force what we say may have. We should not forget that itinerants have an oral tradition. In their eyes, something asserted carries the weight of a jointly signed document. We need to watch out for interpretations or disappointments which can very quickly discredit us. I recall, for example, the mayor of a town who, seeing the difficult situation in which the families lived, had promised them personally how much effort the town would make to make their lives more decent. None of the itinerants ever forgot his speech. For the mayor, it was different: well, yes, he had said all that, but on his own, in his own name, one summer's evening, when relaxing, but it wasn't an authoritative statement.

- **Constantly re-assess the means you use**

Like any tool, the mobile classroom is a means which has successfully responded to a need and, let us not forget, to a request. Initially, there were itinerant families which played a fundamental role pressing for the creation of a travelling school. The danger, with the passage of time, is we might forget the essential role played by discussions with the families and, at the same time, not know what their current questions and expectations are. There, I think, lies the first limitation of the mobile classroom, which can rapidly become a means which is never questioned as time goes

on; a means we are so sure about, that families are no longer the first consideration in our search of teaching approaches, and their views are no longer heard in order to adapt this means to their present situation.

The mobile classroom makes no sense unless it's different from a school. If it becomes solely a mobile classroom, it loses its strength, its credibility, its originality and its freedom. It has sense only if it continues to listen to the itinerant families, if it remains a means for them to preserve their freedom and their culture. It is of no use unless it caters as a priority for those who never, or with very great difficulty, will gain access to our society because of their poverty, their isolation, and because of the utter contempt in which they continue to be held.

The mobile classrooms, just like school, are useful to the itinerants if they respond to their expectations; if they are a place where one can meet and talk; if they prove they are able to teach children and adolescents to read.

What is essential, as we have tried to convey throughout these pages is, therefore, the attitude we adopt in order to know and respect the person we speak to.

These observations have been made to remove the temptation of making generalisations. The truth is there is no one answer, but many answers; and each time it lies in the overall feeling of success felt by the child, his parents and the teacher: the success of gaining respect, of learning something, of better mutual knowledge.

The mobile classroom, therefore, has its own sense. I don't think it can be restricted to being a bridge between "nothing" and a "brick and mortar school". I think it has the value, usefulness and the sense we give it. And this meaning is to be found in the deep and lasting relationship we have with the families. As we have seen, the differences between the various Tzigane families are immense. They stem from the material situation of the groups, the possibilities for occupation of land, the thinking of the group, the way they see and think of our "fixed abode" society.

- **Maintain a constant dialogue, whatever the cost**

Better than further observations, here's a true story:

For many months, I worked with the Manouche “hedge-folk” camped in large fields. On the edge of one of these fields there was a small vegetable garden where a retired man came to work and relax. I often said hello to him as I passed him in his little garden on my way to call the children, and exchanged a few words with him. After lessons, we came back past the garden with the children, who also knew this man well. The man had a friendly smile for all the children who, even if sometimes a bit wild or headstrong, inspired his friendship. He watched them come and go, with their cold and muddy feet; he watched them carrying water in heavy containers, or bringing back shopping bought several kilometres away. He saw their fathers working away on car engines that wouldn't start, and sorting kilos of scrap metal. He saw the women washing clothes, their bare hands plunged in big tubs, and taking days to dry them in damp weather!

He saw, and the fact of seeing was enough to make him want to chat with them as a friend, because he knew how much courage their life demanded and how hard it really was... For him, the life they lived was the same he had experienced as the child of an ordinary family which had suffered from the war. He didn't think that that kind of suffering should still exist in our times. And so, he put the pranks of the children - some carrots or leeks missing from his garden - in a context and, despite everything, invited them to pick some. Of course this was not enough to create a relationship: despite this sensitive friendship, the children still saw him as a “gadjo”, a peasant, someone with a fixed house, who had more than they, and whom they could rob...

Often, the attitude of this man offered an opportunity to speak to the children during the classroom sessions, and to show them that the “fixed abode” people are not all against them, that some of them take a different view of them, understand their life a bit, don't judge them, don't accuse them of theft as soon as a turnip disappears. Little by little, the children understood the respect they owed a man like that. It is the same respect they showed me for 12 years. It was a respect based on gratitude, which makes us different from other “fixed abode” people, because they know they are loved. It's respect which is shown by lots of services rendered, by the special care they take about what belongs to us. All this is the opposite of their first attitude: contempt and even

aggressiveness towards "fixed abode" people and their property.

It was there that I understood how itinerants respect: they do so in specific relationships but not in general ones, in which you're supposed to behave, where there's a code of good conduct. The itinerant respects someone because he knows that the person has shown friendship to him over a long period, by a renewal of trust, despite some slip-ups on both sides. In that case, respect has no limits. With time, this gardener learnt the same lesson and never again found his garden looted: the children knew they could feel a little at home with this gardener, and waited for his arrival to ask for some vegetables or some fruit.

## In Conclusion

**Meet, Listen, Question** are the fundamental attitudes that I have chosen after 12 years in the mobile classroom.

By writing these pages, I have been able to pass on what I learnt from this experience. It is summed up nicely by these three terms. The order of these words is intentional; in any case they are chronological.

To come back to my experience, it is really seeing and meeting these people that enabled me to adapt my teaching methods to the needs of their situation; to adapt myself to this context; and to be prepared to think of new ways of learning which, in fact, were taught to me by the people I had come to teach.

I was able to spend these 12 years working with much serenity, despite some situations which were very difficult to understand and accept. Many people wondered about them: the families and children, my colleagues, numerous collaborators in the field, those I lived with but who had no contact with the itinerants, and finally all those who were hostile towards the itinerants and gave me an opportunity to restate what was most important: a contact that is respectful and concerned for the person, however different or awkward he may be. My wish for all those who will dare to undertake this kind of human adventure, is that they open their eyes and their whole being sufficiently to be captivated by the ardent desire of an authentic encounter.

## The Association for the Schooling of Tzigane Children (A.S.E.T)

A

*document produced by Br Camille Veger, the first mobile classroom teacher*

### **A scheme to promote schooling:**

From 1971 to 1980, the A.S.E.T. concentrated its attention mostly on the fixed abode Tzigane population of the East suburbs of Paris. During the whole of this period, there was an intense campaign to promote literacy learning and the exchange and sharing of teaching resources by schools, families and educational inspectors, which was organised by a socio-educational team made up of 15 or so volunteer school assistants headed by two primary school teachers. Thanks to this scheme, dozens of Tzigane children, Rom and Yugoslavs mainly, were able to go or to return to school.

### **Creation of the first mobile classrooms (A.S.M):**

In the 1980s there remained a major problem: there were hundreds of young itinerants moving around on the outskirts of Paris who were illiterate and had no schooling.

It might be useful to recall at this point that out of a total of about 135,000 semi - or wholly itinerant gypsies, some 20,000 of them are constantly on the move just in the Ile de France department; and that the under 16s represent 45% of this total. The almost total absence of official camp sites, and expulsion from every town they go to, made and still make any kind of schooling impossible for many itinerant children.

It was precisely to alleviate this situation that, in 1982, under the aegis of the Catholic Education Bureau and with the help of the State Education Ministry, the A.S.E.T. decided to create the first mobile classroom in the Paris area, a classroom on wheels intended to teach reading and writing to itinerant children, deprived until then of any other means of schooling.

To respond to the very numerous requests for instruction from itinerants, a whole network of mobile classrooms came into existence in time throughout France. The Brothers and the Catholic Education Bureau managed to stimulate the State Educational system to take part. At present, the 35 or so A.S.E.T. mobile classrooms teach annually more than 5,000 pupils in 15 departments. Ten or so other mobile classrooms are working in France also. These are organised by educational associations and State school teachers.

### **Motivation and aims.**

From the outset, the founders of this educational network for itinerants were inspired by principles of equality, social justice and freedom of choice regarding the right to instruction, recognised by the French Constitution and the Convention of the Rights of the Child, ratified by France.

The text of the law of March 28th 1882 on **compulsory instruction** served as a further initial motive. In fact, this fundamental law is concerned above all with instruction, and not in the first place with school attendance, which proves often impossible for so many itinerant children.

### **Specific educational approach.**

The itinerant teacher working in a mobile classroom offers his pupils material to learn and uses methods which are close to those of his colleagues who work in schools. However, the location of the classroom on a camp site implies necessarily a certain adaptation in the attitude and educational approach of the teacher, which is centred as a matter of priority on the reception and educational follow-up of the children.

It has proved to be indispensable:

- to take into account the basic elements of Tzigane culture, such as the notion of time and space, family clans, oral tradition, language, travel.
- to bring flexibility and understanding to questions of timetables, rate of attendance, dividing up by ages, by scholastic level.
- to attribute great importance to relationships. The long history of rejection experienced by Tziganes for 5 centuries, and the prej-

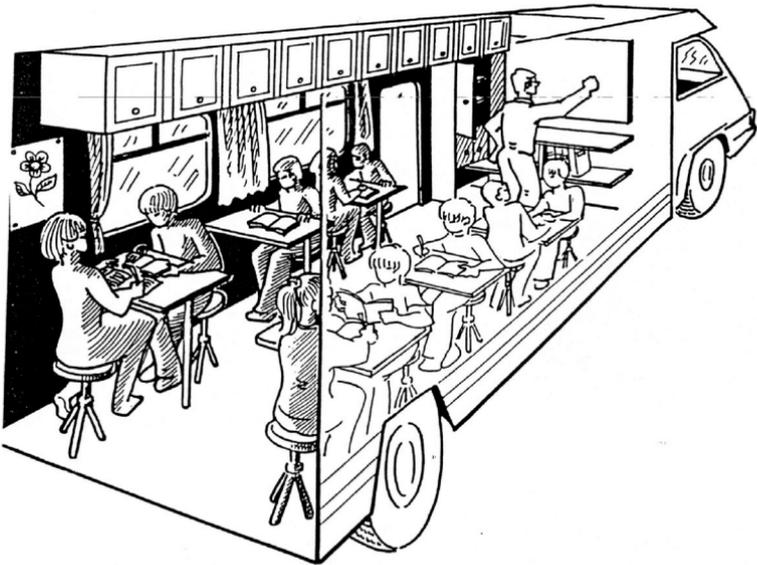
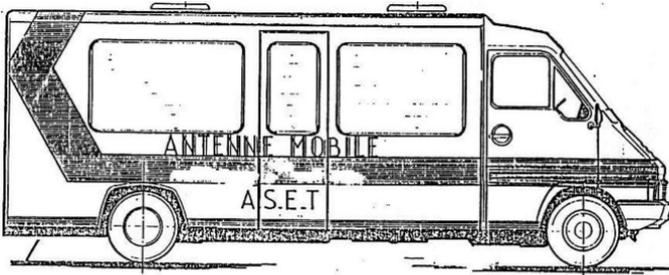
udice of society have created in them feelings of fear and avoidance of school.

- to use a personalised and differentiated educational approach adapted to each child whatever his instructional level.
- to centre most of the school teaching on Reading-Writing-Counting, the expectations of itinerants are unanimous in this matter.
- to make the children learn quickly to read. Tzigane children want to learn to read "quickly and well" to be able to travel more easily.
- to speak with the parents and be able to decipher their needs and their expectations regarding schooling.

### **Conclusion**

Far from forming ghettos, the mobile classrooms, which were created to function as close as possible to the real world of the itinerants, are proving increasingly to be means of opening up, of decompartmentalisation, and as a very effective branch of the public service offered by State education. Associations like A.S.E.T. and several others of the same type can be considered as factors of primary importance in the pursuit of truly inter-cultural education. Far from being obstacles to schooling, they served as half-way houses, as catalysts, providing the necessary flexibility and diversity for the smooth running of the school system, avoiding in this way all attempts at segregation or assimilation. Their innovative experience and the pedagogical research they stimulate can only be useful to State education as a whole.

Plan of a mobile classroom



## Extracts from the private diary of the Teacher

### Diary entry N° 2:

*This morning, as every other morning, Emilienne took her seat in the small bus to go to school. Wesley, sitting next to her, very serious, almost severe, says to her: "Did you wash at least?" This personal remark was not insulting: it reflected rather a concern for cleanliness even if everything here conspires to make you abandon your dignity. Emilienne doesn't answer. She is huddled up and exhausted. Carmen, her mother, had had a go at her before she left: "You're going to school looking like a tramp!" And yet each day she prepares basins of water for her to wash in. When they get to school, the headmaster says they can't keep her if she smells as badly as she had the day before. In the dining room a big empty space is left around her, and the air in the classroom is unbreathable. The other parents come to complain. I speak with Emilienne. Should I take her back home?*

*I see her again, exhausted, in the cold van on winter mornings when I used to come with the lorry. For hours on end, she would walk around the basin without doing anything. What burden weighs down her shoulders, what fear, what shame? I try to find out a little if her mother looks after as she says she does, if she gives her hot water, if she leaves her alone to wash. Emilienne nods her head to say yes. Rather than take her back to her home, and then have to return to the school, we go to Geraldine's house, a colleague who lives close to the school. Once there, perhaps Emilienne will agree to wash, and I know we'll be able to find her some clean clothes. When Emilienne hears my plan, she is filled with joy. Emilienne loves water. At the swimming pool she loves the shower before going into the pool. What mystery weighs down upon her? And she comes back to, still wearing her clothes, even though she's been offered a bath. This mystery with all its wounds frightens me. What can I say to her?*

*How can I really make contact with you, Emilienne, be present to*

*you, enable you to open a door? Her whole body seems to be a locked-up prison. Her arms protect her chest, her eyes are staring at her feet, her back is bent, her shoulders are thrown forward like a wall to protect her. Her silence and her jerky movements leave me standing on the threshold of her dwelling.*

*Eventually, she will allow herself to be led by the hand to the bathroom, like a child reassured after a frightening experience, and she will end up by washing herself, putting on perfume, combing her hair and taking pleasure in dressing.*

*We leave. When I bring her back to the caravan that evening, I shall leave by the road-side this life which has been moulded and fashioned in this unique way. She makes me think that we'll never understand what forms and what wounds us, nor how we exist despite everything.*

*For Emilienne, there remains the link, the half-smile as we leave each other, the good-humoured mockery when something goes wrong for us, her look in the early morning out of the caravan window, wide-awake, almost happy, when it's time to leave for school.*

#### **Diary entry N° 6:**

*Carmen's smile in the early morning bursts out like the sun lighting up the sleepy caravans and the mud that is everywhere. She is the first to be up. When I come to get Emilienne and Toutoune to take them to school, she's already outside, pouring water from the tub to heat it, picking up pieces of wood to light the stove to warm up those still sleeping in the caravan.*

*She smiles at me. What is there behind this smile? For me, it's all the day-to-day courage of these poor families. The strength, each morning, to start again, despite the cold, despite the night, despite the mud you slip in as soon as you step out of the caravan. The strength to look after what living space remains for you: do the housework, shopping, a meal, wash clothes even in ice-cold water.*

*What is there behind this smile? On her part, a first "Good Morning" is like the link that connects her with life, with the outside, with the dignity in the way she looks at her children.*

*All this makes me think of monks and nuns, rising early, and to*

*associate in my mind Carmen's daily tasks, her smile, her courage, her fidelity, with the lives of these people who have left everything behind to support the world by their prayer. As if, at some point, in this starting anew each day they had something in common.*

#### **Diary entry N° 10:**

*Uncontrollable! The group of children is exhausting my last bit of patience! They're always squabbling, running to the window, opening and closing the curtains, all speaking at the same time, running along the rails to check their sparrow trap.*

*They exasperate me: "Why are you behaving like that?"*

*"You have come for a long time, that's why!"*

*There's so much to learn from their answer. The precariousness of our work, always at the mercy of meetings, sudden emergencies and all kinds of tasks, to the detriment of our visits to the camp sites. The desire to learn from the children, the need to persevere in order to know one another and to learn.*

#### **Diary entry N° 12:**

*Angelique A, a 15 year old, died in just 3 days from a brain tumour. Monday March 2nd: all the poorest families of the department were gathered at the cemetery. Faces that were lined, tight-lipped, sombre and sad... Behind them, the winter wind, the grey sky and the motorway. On each face there was the same sudden and hard question in the face of this death.*

*Wednesday March 4th. I met the children of this group again. I would have liked to speak to them about this sudden disappearance. They said nothing, not a word. In their world, you don't speak about death. I said nothing either.*

*What are their rights regarding remembering and weeping? What do they remember?*

*Does this tradition never to speak about the dead help them to forget quickly, not be overcome?*

#### **Diary entry N° 14:**

*When the children left the classroom one of them left a jacket behind. I went out into the darkness - it was already night - to look*

*for the caravan of the child who had forgotten it.*

*Suddenly, I felt a hand take hold of mine as I was speaking with a few parents who were warming themselves around a fire. It was Tony, one of the children from my class.*

"Claire, will you come and see my mother too?"

"Yes, if you want, I'd be happy to meet her."

*On the way to his small caravan, Tony prepared the ground: "We've got a wood stove in the caravan to keep us warm."*

*When we arrived in front of his caravan, Tony went ahead and went in first. It was all dark in the caravan. Through discretion, I stayed outside till I was invited to come in. I heard a voice from the dark, and I caught only two words: "Tony... the foreigner". I understood that Tony's mother didn't want me to see how they lived.*

*Just then, Tony's elder sister came to the door to speak to me. I tried to look as natural as I could. "Tony's mother is not in?"*

"No."

"I would have liked to speak to her about the outings we're going to organise before Christmas".

"I'll speak to her about them."

"Oh well, I'll come back then. Good bye."

*Tony came out of the caravan. He looks disappointed and says nothing. He walks a little way with me. For him, we are friends, a friendship that can bring down walls, overcome fear or shame which so often prevent meetings. His mother hasn't reached that point. There's still some way to go before there's a meeting.*

*As I leave, I break the silence: "Tony, I'll see your mother some other day."*

*And I left him to go about his life.*

### **Diary entry N° 16:**

*A death has occurred, sudden, even if it was expected. Mr M. has died after being ill for several years.*

*The town was enveloped in fog, and caravans had come from all*

*over to join the family. It was not the usual scene at the camp. There were dozens of caravans now on a single site. And a strange kind of silence reigned. Even the children had stopped shouting and playing and remained quiet.*

*An immense fire burnt for nights, a sign of light in the darkness, but also a strong force able to keep the powers of evil at bay. The family was there, most of them standing, warming now one side now another, as best they could. They spoke little, and when they did, it was about everything and nothing. Bales of hay had been placed around the fire so people could also sit. A sort of sensitivity on the part of those who have nothing, but who offer what they can so that people can be comfortable. There was coffee to drink but no food till the day of the funeral.*

*A place had been found in the cemetery. The following day, at 2 pm, we met with the clergy to pray and accompany Mr M. to the cemetery.*

*On the day of the burial, the rain began to fall early in the morning and the site had become a vast sea of mud. Too many vehicles had already broken their chassis. We gathered around the caravan of the dead person. It looked beautiful in the midst of such a sad scene. It had been adorned with flowers with great care, and the hay used on the preceding days had been laid all around making a dry carpet which was good to stand on. Various clergymen from different Manouche groups made quick speeches. I don't remember well what was said, but I can still see the face of the preacher: his eyes were closed and his face turned to the sky. He did not speak, he cried out, speaking to God. It was as if he were shaking him, as if he were convinced that from this earth so sad, from this moment so difficult, and from this imprisonment in earthly "mud", the face of God would appear, as well as his tenderness and his help. "How could it be in any other way? One of theirs had returned to the Lord. They now had a messenger in his presence, capable of coming to their help, to those still banished on earth, those belonging to the great tribe of Wanderers."*

*He began speaking again, and from what he said I remember what it was everyone seems to feel when faced with death: a universal feeling in the face of something we do not understand. He*

*called upon everyone to love one another because there is only that which binds us together here on earth, which preserves our memory, and which binds us beyond the bounds of time in death and eternity.*

*We followed Mr M. For a long time along the alleyways of the cemetery. The children running around got under our feet, silent witnesses of life which comes and goes, goes and comes back. Death which we find so difficult to talk about to the children of our society, is there for them to see, just as it is for the adults.*

*Once the body was buried, we all left in the same deep and proud silence.*

*Good-bye, Mr Meihnard, appointed guardian before God of so many wandering families. Good bye Mr Meihnard! I wondered what he would finally discover "up there" where all injustice, all hatred and all violence are abolished.*

#### **Diary entry N° 17:**

*We'll never really know you, Traveller. You are like the wind that blows. We think you're going to stay and you part.*

*I arrived that afternoon at the place where you had promised to remain, and all that remained was a profound silence. There was the garden that surrounded the abandoned house, the land you had cleaned up. The "blessed" place where you thought you had found a home was closed, and you didn't occupy any more the space in front of the house.*

*On the ground there was a dustbin with a school satchel hanging out. The name on it was of one of yours. Would they go to school one day, when early in the morning on a sunless day, when everything seemed to be settling down, you have been chased away and you have fled leaving behind only a few traces to say you had lived there for some time?*

*Your lorry was still there, and I couldn't resist looking inside: a trolley loaded with beer cans, a toolbox, the engine on the ground, putting an end to any possibility of travelling. The others must have towed your caravan to somewhere a few kilometres from here. I opened the door and found in the only space left free, your dog, with its sad eyes, trembling all over. "They're not capable of abandoning a dog", I thought, and I hoped to see you again*

very soon.

*I walked around the lorry a little more, looking for some other sign you might have left, and I went near the other caravans. There also, I found doors swinging open, as if life had surprised you all in a calm moment, as if suddenly there had been some urgent reason for you to go.*

*Further away, in a copse, I discovered the base of your caravan, and I had the impression I had arrived too late after some drama. I felt bitter also because I had not been there when they were expelled, and I thought how each life is all alone with its departures, its dramas and its problems to resolve.*

*Later on we shall meet again, and I shall have the joy to see that a travelling companion has come to bring you your lorry, and that a dog I know already is warming itself by your fire. It will be a celebration, without it being ever mentioned, because of the reunion. And at the same time I feel that the wind in your fierce looks will make you move on again one day and always again forever: chased away unjustly, or in search of new countrysides; and I know if I came back to wander around the place where you are now, I would find there only traces of the past, and I would stay silent.*

*Unlike us, fixed abode people, who take the time to say good-bye, you disappear silently. There are no good-byes to say, because each individual journey is not really important, because your whole life is an incessant journey.*

## For sharing

1. In what way do these diary extracts reveal a Lasallian educator?
2. Do you sometimes write things down when facing complex educational situations? Why?
3. If yes, do a re-reading of what you wrote. What does it teach you?