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Academic Culture and Emancipation: Oral Histories of the Lives of Roma Women in the Spanish Education System

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Abstract

Overcoming social and academic inequalities in public schools continues to be necessary for vulnerable populations, particularly Roma women and adolescents. In this paper, we consider the issue of early dropout rates for Roma girls in secondary education, as well as their vulnerability at this stage. Two Roma women working as mediators in public schools participated in a narrative-biographical study. Their oral histories have allowed us to delve into the particularities of their lives and the lives of adolescents in public schools, as well as how they reflect on and construct their own identities from their home and school environments. These oral histories (or personal narratives) bring us closer to their struggle for emancipation from gender roles, in contrast to the vision found in the dominant, static, homogenized and clichéd imaginary about Roma women. The results of the critical analysis of these oral histories suggest the need to shift from a disciplinarian academic culture based on segregation, individual effort, little participation from the community and the absence of recognition, to a community-based academic culture of redistribution, in which schooling becomes relevant in the lives of Roma girls as a necessary tool for emancipation without jeopardizing their acceptance in the Roma community.

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1. Introduction

When taking a closer look at the academic career and success of the Roma community in the Spanish education system (primary, secondary, baccalaureate and university), especially for Roma girls and adolescents, we find a diverse reality still tied to the history of segregation and exclusion which characterized its beginnings (Márquez and Padua, 2016). Since the 1980s, compulsory schooling of Roma students in Spain has been determined by the dominant, non-Roma society, which makes decisions with no participation from the Roma community, no dialogue regarding their interests and without taking their experiences into account. In her summary of the last 30 years of Roma students' schooling, San Román (1992) reminds us that the majority of Roma people have experienced a backwards and segregating educational model, i.e., they are placed in ordinary schools but relegated to specialized or exclusively ethnic ones.

To establish the context of this study, we will use a series of tables which summarize the results of surveys carried out and published by the Gypsy Secretariat Foundation (FSG, by its Spanish acronym) in recent years. These studies show that of the approximately 200 thousand school-age Roma children and adolescents in Spain, only a few hundred will have access to university education and an even smaller number are currently enrolled (Salinas, 2009). Some of these studies demonstrate not only advances but also new issues regarding the continuity and success of Roma students in obtaining their obligatory secondary school (ESO, by its Spanish acronym) diplomas, and their continuing post-obligatory studies (Márquez and Padua, 2016).

The following two tables reflect the results of various surveys carried out in the Roma community about different topics. In 2001, surveys show that despite advances in the universalization of schooling, high early dropout rates persist.

In 2010, the FSG and the Institute of Women performed a study about the incorporation and academic career of Roma girls in ESO. This study investigates Roma students' continuity in secondary education. While the number of female students who begin ESO is lower, more female students than male students obtain their diploma, almost double. However, when asked about their social-emotional situation in school, female Roma students recognize that it was less satisfactory than that of their non-Roma peers

Table 1. Schooling Data on Incorporation of Roma Girls in ESO (FSG, 2001; 2010)

Year 2001	Results	Year 2010	Results
Percentage of school-age children enrolled	94% of children	Percentage of school-age children enrolled	100% of children
Greater continuity	In preschool	Greater continuity	In preschool and primary school
Higher dropout rate	In primary and ESO	Higher dropout rate	For girls starting ESO.
Unknown	What is happening in the Spanish school system?	Unknown	What are the factors that drive dropout rates in secondary schools?

The data collected in a 2013 study of the academic careers of Roma adolescents confirms the need for change in Spanish academic institutions.

Table 2. Academic Careers of Roma Adolescents (Source: FSG, 2013)

Continuity of studies	Age	Roma Adolescents	Compared to General Population
Do not finish obligatory studies	16 to 24	64%	13.3%
Repeat 2nd course ESO	16	41.8%	12.8%
Continue studying baccalaureate	16	3.4%	46.8%

The qualitative study, "Brudila Calli: Las mujeres gitanas contra la exclusión. Superación del absentismo y fracaso escolar de las niñas y adolescentes gitanas" (Brudila Calli: Roma women against exclusion. Overcoming absenteeism and academic failure in Roma girls and adolescents) (Aubert and Larena, 2004; Márquez and Padua, 2004, 2009)

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