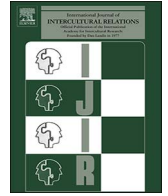




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## Reasons for the underachievement and school drop out of Spanish Romani adolescents. A mixed methods participatory study<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study applied concept mapping (CM), a mixed methods approach, to examine how the members of a multi-ethnic educational community (students, families and teachers) define the causes for the high rates of early school leaving found among their *Gitano* or Spanish Romani students. The study had a participatory focus and aimed to generate a common framework leading to a joint assessment of the problem. Data were collected in a high school in which 19% of students were *Gitanos*; a combination of integrated qualitative and quantitative techniques were used. All sectors of the school community participated actively in the processes of collecting, structuring and interpreting data. The resulting concept map showed a multifactorial matrix where six main issues intersected: ethnic differences and intercultural relations; the influences and encouragement of families; adolescent risk behaviours; students' individual values, expectations and practices; the accumulation of learning gaps that make school progress harder for some students; and the effects of remedial programmes, particularly those of compensatory education, that seem to be reinforcing segregation without bridging gaps. The articulated knowledge that participants provided was comprehensive, detailed and insightful. There was much intercultural agreement on some explanations but considerable dissent on others. Non-*Gitanos* blame *Gitano* families for not doing enough for their children's education and for maintaining gender and marriage institutions that clash with the values and aims of the school. *Gitano* families and students reject these reasons and point to racist attitudes and exclusionary processes as key reasons for dropping out of school.

### Introduction

The Spanish Romani, most commonly known as *Gitanos*<sup>1</sup> or *Calé*, are the main autochthonous minority of Spain. In other words, they did not derive from recent international migrations. Although the total number of *Gitanos* is the subject of much speculation and debate, most informed estimates place it in the range of 500,000 to 600,000. They reside in over 1000 localities in all regions of Spain and in some regions in the South of France (FSG, 2008; FSG & MSSSI, 2016).

<sup>☆</sup> A short and preliminary version of this research was presented at 2015 ERPA International Congresses on Education and was published in the proceedings of the conference (Alvarez, Parra, & Gamella, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> 'Gitano' is the term most Spanish Romani people use to refer to themselves, both privately and publicly. It is also the term most frequently used by minority leaders when naming public institutions such as the *Instituto de Cultura Gitana*. It derives from the term 'Egiptano' and thus from a misunderstanding of their origin from Egypt. In this sense, it is synonymous with the English term 'Gypsy'. Today, many Romani people reject this term and their equivalents in other languages as derogatory, and prefer to be identified by their own denominations, such as Roma, Sinti, Kalé, etc. or by the generic term 'Roma'. In Spain, *Caló* (plural *Calé* or *Calós*; from the Romani 'black') is also a term that many *Gitanos* use to refer to themselves, although less commonly.

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*Gitanos* come from the first migratory influx of Romani groups into Western Europe and seem to share a common remote origin with the other Romani groups that live today throughout Europe and America. These groups show a considerable heterogeneity in sociocultural terms, but they also demonstrate some similar characteristics concerning their social organisation through kinship and marriage links. In addition, they have recurrently suffered the rejection and discrimination by the dominant majorities around them (Fraser, 1995; Matras, 2015; Piasere, 2004).

The first evidence of the presence of groups of *Gitanos* in the Iberian Peninsula dates from the first half of the fifteenth century. Hence, the customs and life patterns of *Gitanos* have developed in the context of a long coexistence with local Spanish populations under the power and jurisdiction of the crown, the church and the local elites. Their existence has often been marked by segregation, pressures to assimilate, persecution, and coercion (Gómez Alfaro, 1993; Leblon, 1985; Pym, 2007). However, there are also many examples of peaceful cooperation, exchange, and mutual appreciation among neighbours (Gamella, Gómez Alfaro, & Pérez Pérez, 2014; Gómez Alfaro, 2010). This mixing of cultures is particularly visible in Andalusia, where some of the most celebrated elements of its cultural heritage, such as those embodied in flamenco music and performance, include crucial *Gitano* contributions (Leblon, 2003).

In the second half of the twentieth century, *Gitanos* were gradually incorporated into the institutions of the wider society. In particular, in the democratic period that started in 1977, the Spanish Romani were granted access to most public services, such as universal and free health care, public housing, public benefits, and pensions for the elderly. Moreover, *Gitano* children were integrated into the compulsory education system like the rest of the children living in Spain. This caused some initial resistance and conflict on the part of some non-*Gitano* parents (Gamella, 2002); however, their inclusion in the education system is now commonplace and widely accepted on both sides of the cultural divide.

Today, the *Gitano* population is increasingly heterogeneous in socioeconomic and cultural terms. However, the majority of *Gitanos* still experience different levels of exclusion in terms of occupation, income, education, political representation and health status. *Gitanos* are over-represented among the poorer Spaniards and tend to reside in the most neglected neighbourhoods. The demographic structure of their populations indicates higher fertility and a lower life expectancy than the rest of the Spanish population (Gamella & Martín Carrasco-Muñoz, 2017; La Parra-Casado, 2016).

Thus, some problems remain, and they are particularly visible in the spheres of education and employment, where *Gitano* people lag behind. This makes them particularly dependent on state aid, subsidies and public benefits as well as highly vulnerable to economic crisis and austerity cuts (FSG, 2013b).

The propose of this study was to examine how *Gitano* and non-*Gitano* members of a multiethnic educational community identify, conceptualize and assess the causes for the high rates of school drop out found among *Gitano* students. We wanted to build with the participants' collaboration a shared concept map of the perceived reasons of *Gitanos*' school underachievement and analyse the areas of intercultural agreement and dissent on the causes of the problem.

### *Romani students' discontinuation of school*

From about 1986 to 2005, within the space of one generation, almost all *Gitano* children were incorporated into the Spanish public school system. Hence, formal education among *Gitanos* has increased considerably in the last three decades. Illiteracy has been reduced, and there is a small but growing group of *Gitano* college graduates and professionals in different fields (Abajo & Carrasco, 2004; Bereményi & Carrasco, 2017; Gamella, 2011). However, a considerable educational gap between *Gitanos* and the majority population persists in almost all the localities where *Gitanos* live. For instance, a survey of *Gitano* households conducted in 2006 by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) estimated that illiteracy was about 15% for *Gitanos* versus 2% for the overall population, and the functional illiteracy rate was 26%. The illiteracy rate of adult *Gitano* women was double that of men (CIS, 2006). The same survey revealed that only three out of ten *Gitano* children finished the four-year compulsory secondary education (*enseñanza secundaria obligatoria*),<sup>2</sup> and few among them succeeded in reaching the upper levels of high school or college.

In the following years, a wide gap persisted. Thus, a survey conducted in 2012 showed that the proportion of young adults from 18 to 24 who had not attained upper secondary education nor were in school or training was 64% among *Gitanos* and 25% among the overall Spanish population (FSG, 2013a; Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deportes, 2014). This study also found that 40% of *Gitano* children remained in primary school at ages when they should be in high school (FSG, 2013a: 82). Most of them had repeated grades in their early years of schooling. For *Gitano* students, the main barriers in the compulsory period occur at the end of primary education (grade 6, commonly finished at 12 years of age) and during the first years of ESO – particularly the second year (grade 8, commonly finished at age 14). Most students leave school and formal education at age 16 without completing any degree.

In Romani groups throughout Europe, it is common for students to drop out from school without completing their high school education (FRA, 2014). For instance, in Central and Eastern countries such as Hungary, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia, over 80% of Roma between the ages of 18 and 24 leave school early without adequate qualifications or

<sup>2</sup> In Spain, education is free and compulsory from ages 6–16. Compulsory education includes six years of primary education and four years of secondary education. These four years form the ESO (*Educación Secundaria Obligatoria*) and last from 12 to 16 years of age. At the end of the fourth year, students who passed all the grades get their diploma. ESO is the highest educational level that most *Gitano* students reach, but only a small proportion finish it and get their high school diploma. After completing the ESO, students may follow two paths: one geared towards the Spanish Baccalaureate and subsequently to university and the other towards vocational training. The Spanish *Bachillerato* is the post-16 stage of education, comparable to the A Levels/Higher (Scottish) in the UK and the Baccalaureate in France. Vocational training is organised into two levels: Middle Grade Training Cycles (*Ciclos Formativos de Grado Medio*), similar to the BTEC Level 3 extended diploma, and Superior-level Training Cycles (*Ciclos Formativos de Grado Superior*), similar to the BTEC Level 4/5 diploma.

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