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

Márquez García, M.J.^a, Prados Megías, M.E.^b & Padua Arcos, D^{c*}

Facultad de Pedagogía, Valladolid, 04120, Spain.

Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad de Almería, Almería, 04120, Spain

Grupo Investigación Hum-619, ProCie, Málaga, 04120, Spain

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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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34-610508962
E-mail address: mariajesus.marquez@uva.es

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)

details the need for transformation of public schools from different approaches in the interest of inclusion and continuity of female Roma adolescents. It responds to the obstacles that female Roma adolescents face in their academic careers and favors inclusion. This study represents an important step towards academic inclusion of the Roma community, identifying two central issues: the importance of building a Learning Community based in egalitarian dialogue, as well as the participation of families as central axes of transformation.

Lastly, we will address our study recently carried out with Roma women working as intercultural mediators in public schools with students from the Roma community. In this study, oral histories are used in an innovative way to capture their life experiences and perspectives on the school system, as well as their personal and professional lives as educators and mediators in academic institutions. As educational professionals, they assume the task of making education more inclusive using curricular, organizational, cultural and community resources.

2. Context and Method

This paper is part of a greater study performed in Andalusia, Spain, using the professional oral histories of intercultural mediators who work in public schools, both primary and secondary, with a high percentage of Roma students in the cities of Seville, Granada y Almería. While the original study covers a larger population, in this paper we focus on the analysis and results of the oral histories of two Roma women who work as mediators in Granada. They were selected because they are university graduates in Primary Education. They also work in academic institutions or are connected with an intercultural mediation program for the academic inclusion and continuity of the Roma population in obligatory education which operates through an NGO. Together serve a total of five primary schools and four secondary schools with high percentages of Roma students.

Table 3. Mediators and the Population They Serve

Mediators	Age	Schools where they work	Years of Experience in Mediation with Roma Population
Simza	28	2 Primary and 2 Secondary	2 non-consecutive years
Vadoma	45	3 Primary and 2 Secondary	21 consecutive years

2.1. Objectives

The narrative-biographical approach is not meant to make generalizations in the study or the objectives set. We focus on a particular approach to personal experience which considers the possibility of resonance, i.e., the idea that testimony, evidence, or an interpretation of the human experience can resonate personally and collectively through individuals in order to transform practices and contexts (Celada, 2009).

In this paper, we intend to show two Roma women's personal experiences with academic inclusion and to analyze their careers from the narrative-biographical perspective. We highlight aspects of their careers that could help other Roma girls and adolescents to continue their studies thanks to the resonance of these oral histories in their lives, and in other academic and social experiences. We also highlight proposals to transform the schools where Simza y Vadoma work in a community-oriented and participative sense, and which encourage the emancipation of the Roma community.

2.2. Why Include Oral Histories of Roma Women in the Study

Along with the aforementioned contributions related to academic failure and dropout rates among Roma girls and adolescents, a biographical narration is added to offer a new vision of the life paths and professional experiences of certain "academically successful" Roma women. These women work daily to defend and develop possibilities for academic inclusion, recognition of Roma culture and emancipation as a force of social and educational change.

As has been mentioned, this study was performed from a biographical-narrative perspective. This approach, which is integrated in the qualitative paradigm, is an accessible, naturalist and democratic practice. The telling and sharing of personal narratives demands a dialogical and intersubjective relationship, taking into account that subjectivity is a

necessary condition for social knowledge. The narrative-biographical approach has an important place in the qualitative paradigm due to its credibility and legitimacy in creating knowledge about education (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000; Bolívar, 2002; Goodson, 2004; Rivas and Herrera, 2009; Chase, 2015).

2.3. Methodological Development

The main information-gathering tool was the biographical interview, which highlighted personal aspects of the subjects' life histories, opinions, reflections and professional experiences as intercultural mediators in public schools. In-depth interviews and participant observation were used to establish an in situ relationship with these Roma women in the public schools. Ethical considerations were a central element during every moment of this study. When we say the ethics of narrative-biographical studies, we are referring to *contingent ethics*, which originated in feminist models and, unlike *universalist ethics*, includes “that performers treat persons and their cares and concerns with dignity and respect. Indeed, the values that structure the performance are those shared by the community and its members. These values include care, trust, and reciprocity. Because of these shared understandings this model assumes that there will be few ethical dilemmas requiring negotiation” (Denzin, 2007: 133). Throughout the study, from the interviews and conversations to the analysis, interpretation and writing of the reports, the researchers form part of the group situated in a community-oriented, feminist and local ethic which respects and protects the rights, interests and sensibilities of the study participants (Christians, 1994). At the center of this process is an open dialogue based on *equality, solidarity, meaning creation, transformation and respect for differences*.

Table 4. Methodological Process

Participants	Biographical Interviews	Participant Observation	Returning of the Interviews	Thematic Analysis of Interviews and Observations	Construction of Narratives	Dialogue about Personal Narrative	Final Interpretative Report
Simza	4 in depth	6 months	Draft about the emerging themes in interviews	Joint analysis based on emerging themes and categories of analysis	A personal narrative is constructed highlighting relevant aspects of professional and personal identity	This participant revises the narrative, giving confirmation, credibility and recommendations	Showing aspects which impede or facilitate transformation
Vadoma	5 in depth	1 year	Organized by theme and a new interview	Draft presentation and joint analysis	Personal narrative highlighting similarities and differences	Final revision and acceptance of personal narrative	From their own proposals. The school as a community

The analysis is based on grounded theory, which states that the theory emerges inductively from the data. The information was coded in three stages: 1° *Open Coding*: the text is read closely to identify themes. 2° *Axial Coding*: the themes are compared and connections are drawn. 3° *Selective Coding*: one central category is used to form a narrative which connects all the other categories and themes (Gibbs, 2012). Below we identify the analytical themes which make up the leitmotif in the narratives of each participant.

2.4. Participants and emerging topics

In this study, the experiences of two Roma women have been gathered. They belong to different generations, but both work as mediators in an NGO and in schools to develop an academic inclusion project for Roma adolescents. Their oral histories tell of a resilient struggle both in the personal and family sphere, which, in turn, transforms their personal lives. Their academic success breaks down many of the prejudices against the Roma community. For these women, academic coexistence in diversity is an asset of their academic background. They highlight aspects of the patriarchal society as part of their struggle and value the support of their friends and family. They demand changes in schools, especially in family-community-teacher relationships and the acknowledgement of their culture, while recognizing the need for greater participation. They work against any kind of segregation. Among their concerns, they emphasize using community mediation to bring about changes in education and the need for increased interaction between families and teachers, as well as promoting intercultural and community dialogue to create a liberating and

inclusive academic project. A summary of this section can be found in table 5.

Table 5. Selected Themes Extracted from Oral Histories

Oral histories	Presentation	Autobiographical Themes
Simza	Roma woman, age 28. Teaching Professional She works for an ONG Program for academic continuity of Roma adolescents.	A story of personal and family resilience. Changes within the family in the lives of her grandparents, her parents and her own life over 20 years. Family relations. Her mother, a fighter. Transformations in the home environment. Her academic experience. Female friends as support for emancipation. Living between the Roma and non-Roma worlds. Her struggle with the patriarchy in her own social circle. University studies outside of hometown. The need for swift changes within the school. The importance of the family-teacher relationship. School system resists change. Recognition by teachers. Families feel uncomfortable participating in the school. Her worries: the need to contribute to change within the Roma community. Being a role model for Roma families and girls. Breaking down stereotypes from the inside. Breaking down stereotypes in society at large.
Vadoma	Roma woman, age 45. Married, three children. Teaching Professional Experience as a community educator and mediator. She works for an ONG Program for academic continuity of Roma adolescents.	A personal story of struggle for recognition: family life in a small town where Roma people are not treated differently. An important family in the town. Her uncle is university faculty member. Her father encouraged her studies. Support from family. Married, two daughters and a son. Coexistence of Roma and non-Roma people. University studies. Interested in politics. Involvement in community associations. Participant in Roma youth movements. Her connection to artistic movements. The living history of compulsory schooling of Roma population: 29 years in contact with Roma community associations and the beginning of compulsory schooling of Roma population. Work with Roma women's associations. Work in the segregating "aulas puente", a type of special needs classroom, which was the first experience with compulsory schooling that the Roma community had. Attendance monitor, additional responsibilities. Currently coordinates an academic mediation program in an NGO which works for the advancement of the Roma community. Works against prejudices and stereotypes towards the Roma community. Works to build relationships between families, teachers and students. Works on prejudices that families have towards the school system. Mediator trainer and consultant. Her worries: Schools' interaction with the cultural environment and neighborhood. Cultural dialogue. Community transformation through the school. Inclusive processes and methodologies. Women's struggle against the patriarchy. Emancipation.

3. Discussion: Identity and Inclusive Schools

3.1. Identity and Emancipation. Role models and Diversity

When Simza and Vadoma become aware of their otherness, of the roles and stereotypes assigned to them as women and as members of a minority culture regarded with prejudices and stereotypes by the hegemonic culture, they begin to reflect on their lives, their culture, the hegemonic culture and diversity. This reflective process, their life experiences and the transformations they bring about in their own environment are key elements in their work as mediators in academic contexts where social and academic cultures converge. They explain how they have lived and reflected on their otherness, their peculiarities, their self-image and the stereotypes associated with belonging to a discredited culture. For these women, interacting with diverse people and sociocultural contexts has enabled them to see themselves and others as both equal and different. Here, difference no longer represents exclusion, but rather the plurality that characterizes equality.

The *reflective identity*, or emancipatory identity, as named by Freire (1970, 1997), had led to the challenging transformation of their home lives in a context of continuous negotiation. Family is the first sphere of controversy and of support. School is another important space, where friendships and diverse interactions are key to continuity. Their oral histories show that their difference and their personal life choices are compatible with, and not a rejection of, their social group. The participants refer to their *multiple identities* as a work in progress. They continue to break free from what defines them and add peculiarities to find their equality in difference (Flecha, 1997; Puigvert, 2001). It may seem

that their position is ambiguous, "hybrid" as some of the women describe it, or even belonging to "two worlds". However, they consider this to be a privileged and personally-rich position (Habermas, 1999; Maalouf, 1999; Dubar 2000; Sen, 2007).

Simza and Vadoma explain that their own life challenges and the *reflective-solidary* identities they construct are key to their work in multicultural contexts, specifically in ghettos. In these areas, it is necessary to work with minorities to raise their expectations, show the diversity of the Roma community and seek out resources for overcoming difficulties through an egalitarian dialogue which returns the social meaning of education to excluded groups: "education as a personal and social opportunity" (Vadoma and Simza). It is also important to work with teachers to help break down social stereotypes attributed to the minority culture and recover the emancipatory function of academic culture. They express their commitment to bringing about change by serving as role models and helping other Roma women to change with a clear message: "*studying and being a Roma woman are compatible*" (Vadoma and Simza).

3.2. First Challenge: End segregating culture in schools

The contributions of these participants have allowed us to analyze the public schools where they work each day. *The segregating culture of public schools* is one of the greatest challenges they face when working with vulnerable populations and in areas of social exclusion. In most cases, the context is described as hierarchical, closed to the community and to interprofessional work, with a disciplinarian-behaviorist policy. This context also takes a segregating approach to diversity and conflicts, maintains a bureaucratic and sometimes prejudiced relationship with families, and holds low expectations for students. Its organization is based on fractured specialization and the belief that the community, referring to social and home contexts, must change in order for student learning and school life to change.

This academic culture is intensified in secondary schools with a higher dropout rate, greater distance between teachers and families and a greater division and specialization of work for teachers and other educational actors. Schools with a disciplinarian culture maintain a curriculum with low expectations for student learning. These schools reduce opportunities and reproduce inequalities, assuming that academic failure is an individual matter unrelated to the school.

3.3. Second Challenge: Intercultural Dialogue and Transformation

Lack of communication is one of the conflicts that Simza and Vadoma find most often in public secondary schools with vulnerable social contexts. Without this dialogue there is no foundation for a community-based educative project. Thus, one of their challenges as mediators is to contribute to changing the *social framework* of the school, the families and the environment. In addition, they work to create an open and shared community based on cultural recognition and the challenge of social and academic equality. To achieve this goal they approach their work with a joint strategy to produce intercultural dialogue by generating spaces for local teachers and families to meet and interact. This transformative dialogue means understanding their role as a bridge between different realities, all of which must change, i.e., teachers, students, families and the environment. The participants propose that one way to achieve dialogue and interaction between these parties would be to increase the presence of Roma people (family members, mediators or teachers) in schools. These representatives could provide diverse points of view, act as role models and enrich the process of reflection, cultural exchange, education and criticism within schools and minority culture (Touraine, 1997; Wiewiorka, 2004, Soriano, 2006).

3.4. Third challenge: Community mediation

This study shows that intercultural mediation should lead to the development of mediation practices by teachers and the community at large (Corbo, 1999; Boqué, 2003). It is first necessary to develop a spirit of mediation within the school based on the changing relationships between various agents, the absence of prejudice, higher expectations, positive language and the inclusion of families and the community in the academic, social and organizational aspects of the school and the classroom.

This possibility can be found in "open schools", i.e., democratic schools with a community-based academic culture. In these schools, the experiences within the school and its classrooms are connected to the outside world. There is also open communication between families and teachers, bringing families closer to the school and teachers closer to the community, which creates a shared sociopolitical compromise.

Pedagogical matters become mediation matters and vice versa, allowing for continuity between mediation and pedagogical projects. This symbiosis makes it possible to connect social, participative and curricular aspects to create a joint community project for social and academic transformation. For the participants, dialogic mediation goes beyond ad hoc intervention by mediators. It is rather a shared cultural and pedagogical action which transforms the social framework to make everyone educators and mediators. From this perspective, mediation moves away from on-demand interventions and the routine application of conflict resolution techniques in an ethnocentric model. It becomes the way to construct a relevant educational project and posits the school as an engine of social progress, i.e., the school as mediator for social equality through the recognition of cultural difference.

4. Conclusions

The study of the oral histories of Roma women shows our current society the great changes that have occurred in the lives of these women over the last thirty years, as well as their commitment to the developing emancipation of other Roma women who live in situations of social, academic and emotional exclusion. These great changes also pose great challenges in an academic context which continues to be segregating. Currently, 60 percent of Roma adolescents drop out of secondary education, only reinforcing the social exclusion of vulnerable groups.

The paradigm from which to approach current changes in education must overcome old tendencies which are "canonical and selective and should be oriented towards an emancipatory educative project, moving from passive, nonconformist subjectivities to active, democratic subjectivities" (Barbosa de Oliveira, 2008). Thus, it is necessary to peel back layers which systematically connect to an anticolonialist logic which favors the development of emancipated personal and collective identities, such as:

- The home environment as an emotional context against the patriarchy and for the development of a new family model.
- The school as a place of knowledge, experience and coexistence against segregation and for the development of a democratic culture.
- The community as a local, ethnic and religious space against local, ethnic and religious discrimination for the development of community-based knowledge, equality and the recognition of diversity as an asset.

Civic space against domination for the democratization of knowledge and intercultural dialogue.

The challenge of using schools as social mediators is constructing an emancipatory project, and it moves from a disciplinarian and segregating model to a community-based inclusive model which defines school success as the academic success, better coexistence, dialogic learning and participation of its students. From the perspective of this study, the job of school mediators should be to generate an egalitarian dialogue and contribute to the construction of a culture of mediation in the school, one shared by teachers, families, social entities, etc. To achieve this transformation, intersubjective, horizontal relationships must be established in order to create a Learning Community (Elboj et al., 2002) which connects the home, academic, community and civic spaces to prevent social exclusion.

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