

The Shere Rom Project: Looking for Alternatives to the Educational Exclusion of Roma¹

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Abstract: School failure and early school dropout particularly affect members of certain minority groups such as the gypsy² population. The obstacles that must be overcome for the members of these groups appear to be related to the discontinuities between the values and goals of community family life and those of the school. This article presents an analysis of obstacles based on the perception of gypsy families and other minority groups who don't have the same difficulties. The findings of this study help to analyze and understand the characteristics that promote the inclusion through extended education communities based on the Fifth Dimension model within the framework of a project developed in Barcelona with the gypsy and immigrant population.

Keywords: Intercultural education, communities of practice, Roma education, extended education, educational inclusion

1 Introduction

The Shere Rom project was born in 1998 with the aim of creating a learning space free of the constrictions of formal education and oriented toward the educational inclusion of the gypsy population that had indices of absenteeism, early dropout and failure rates much higher than those of any other social group in Spain, as immigrants. Fifteen years later, the project has grown and further developed in various parts of the metropolitan area of Barcelona, first as community educational practices outside of school focusing on the advancement of members of gypsy communities, and later within schools with high levels of cultural diversity among students and in environments characterized by the risk of social exclusion. Realizing the project within schools was only possible after having developed tools and procedures in

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2 We use the term Roma when talking about Roma Community and Gypsy when referring to the Spanish roma community due they refer to themselves with that term.

educational outreach communities, free from the constraints of the scholastic institution. Its appropriation by the school involves the transformation of formal educational practices, moving from a classic model of transmission to another based on collaboration (Rogoff/Matusov/White 1996). In this article we analyze the key factors in the continuity of the project over 15 years using the conceptual tools of cultural psychology.

2 Gypsies and Formal Education

In modern societies, formal education has become the main tool for social cohesion, essential for the maintenance of the social status of the middle class, the upward mobility of members of lower classes, and social inclusion of children of immigrant families and minority groups. The education administrations of democratic states have been oriented to ensure full enrollment of children and adolescents in schools making absenteeism, early dropout and failure rates system problems that should be corrected.

Compensatory strategies and the formulation of the multicultural school are part of this policy of error correction in schooling aimed at ensuring equal opportunities for children of immigrant families or national ethnic minorities. However, belonging to some of these groups today is related with a series of handicaps for obtaining basic educational levels, and even more, for access to higher education (see discussion on the results of PISA in Brüggemann/Bloem 2013; and Ferrer/Valiente/Castel 2008).

The range of resources allocated by education administrations to combat the difficulties presented for immigrant students has focused mainly on addressing the barriers caused by language differences. Thus, compensatory education programs or reception classrooms are primarily oriented to learning the language of instruction of the school. Several studies (Cummins 1981; Hakuta/Butler/Witt 2000; Thomas/Collier 1997; Vila et al. 2008) have shown that while the manner and pace of acquisition of the language of instruction is a fundamental factor for school inclusion, language is not the only or even the main factor that explains the differences between groups given that there is no correlation between the distance between the home language and school language on the one hand, and school success on the other. This is the case in the United States, where the levels of excellence achieved by a high percentage of members of the Chinese community are in contrast to the low average achievement of some Anglophone group members such as African Americans. It is also the case in Spain, where the academic success of children of Slavic origin is contrasted with the very low expectations of success of Spanish or Catalan-speaking members of the gypsy population.

The ethnic group in Europe that presents the most difficulty for educational inclusion is the Roma, a group that experiences a situation of enormous inequality in terms of access to formal education. In Spain, whereas within the general population illiteracy is almost nonexistent at 2%, among the gypsy population the rate reaches 13%, and if we add people with no formal education, the rate reaches 30.6%, whereas the percentage for the general population is close to 8%. Furthermore, while in the overall population, the percentage of people that have only reached the level of

primary education is 36%, among the gypsy population the percentage reaches 76%. As shown in table 1, access to studies beyond compulsory secondary education is marginal (Laparra 2011).

Table 1. Comparison of education level in Roma and general population, 2006

	Roma population			General population		
	Men	Women	TOTAL	Men	Women	TOTAL
Illiterate	10.1%	18.6%	14.5%	1.4%	3.0%	2.2%
No studies	33.2%	28,8%	30.6%	8.4	10.9%	9.7%
Primary	29.8%	32.5%	31.2%	23.8	24.5%	24.1%
Secondary (1st step)	25.2%	19.4%	22.2%	23.8	20.5%	22.1%
Secondary (2nd step)	1.4%	1.3%	19.8%	19.8	19.2%	19.5%
Higher education	0.3%	0.2%	22.8%	22.8	21.9%	22.3%

Source: Sociological Research Center's 2007 in gypsy household (Laparra 2011)

There is a clear generational progress, and in 2006, while in the group over 65 years of age had levels of illiteracy reaching 55.2% and only 9.6% having completed primary education, in the group of 16 to 24 year-olds, the percentages are reversed, with a 2.4% illiteracy rate and 78.6% having completed primary studies or more.

However, of the 92.5% of gypsy children in school at age 12 (the age corresponding to the last year of primary school), only 60% of those children are in the course that corresponds to their rightful age when the levels of the general population are at 84.2%.

The secondary education data is significantly worse. Among young gypsies 13 to 15 years old there is a 21.9% drop out rate (while the rate is at 2.5% for the general population) and the differences between the sexes are very pronounced: in girls dropping out is almost double that of boys. When age 16 is reached, 53.1% of gypsy youth are not in school and have gone only as far as the primary educational level. That is, more than half of the boys and girls from the gypsy population did not enter secondary education or dropped out without meeting its objectives.

Thus, the school, as institution, presents special difficulties for the inclusion of gypsy students, who are not comparable with other cultural minority groups becoming from immigration. These groups face some difficulties related with the migration process in the new cultural environment, or with the learning of a new language to attend school. There are conflicting values between school and families in African, Asian and Latino American families, but we have never found such oppositional positions as with roma families.

The difficulties of schools in integrating gypsy students, comparable in all European countries (Rus/Zatreanu 2009), are diverse and are situated in the objective living conditions of the gypsy communities, in the educational history of the families of that community, and in the discontinuities between these families' values and those of the school. The education system should question itself specifically on the structural elements of schools that cause them to fail in the inclusion of gypsy students.

3 An Interpretation From a Cultural-Historical Perspective

Why does the school function in such an unsatisfactory way with certain minority groups? This question cannot be epistemologically neutral. From a cultural-historical perspective we understand development and education as the participation in sociocultural practices that promotes the appropriation of artifacts required to form an active part of the community:

“... first, in that thinking and learning are considered functional efforts made by individuals to solve problems of importance to their culture; secondly, because it is accepted that the direction of development varies according to the goals, rather than there existing a universal end to which all development should be directed. Hence, to understand cognitive development, it is necessary to take into account the particular problems that children try to solve and their significance within the culture” (Rogoff 1990, pp. 155–156).

From this cultural-historical perspective emerge such questions as: Is the school practice a meaningful sociocultural scenario for gypsy students? Do its practices make sense to the gypsy population? Are the school’s goals identifiable and shared? And how are school practices incorporated into the identity of gypsy students? Guided by these questions, the ethnographic work in schools prior to the project (Crespo/Pallí/Lalueza 2002; Lalueza/Crespo 1996; Lalueza et al. 2001) allows us to identify three areas in which schools have difficulty in the inclusion of gypsy students: a) acquisition of cultural tools that allow for participation in the institutional practices of the school; b) appropriation of the motives that give meaning to the participation in school practices and their incorporation in the students’ identity; and c) constructing narratives for sharing meanings and establishing common goals.

Failure in the Acquisition of Cultural Tools

The basic skills (reading, math, science) acquired in school are artifacts that mediate our relationship with the environment. Their acquisition allows us to participate in social practices and, therefore, form part of the reference community. Thus, failure in their acquisition hinders social inclusion.

Mediating artifacts embody cultural heritage in that they are an “aspect of the material world that has changed during the history of their incorporation into goal-directed human action” (Cole 1996, p. 113). Artifacts transform the environment in which human beings live, but also transform humans by defining their activity. When a child participates in a goal-oriented activity, he or she appropriates the cultural heritage embodied in the artifacts.

The historical emergence of reading and writing was a revolutionary form of mediation to which Vygotsky and Luria gave great importance in the explanation of the mental functioning of the modern subject. Michael Cole (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition 1983), in referring to the latter states that it is not just the acquisition of writing that causes mental changes that are attributed to literacy, but also the characteristics of the activity in which the acquisition occurs, and the practices that are incorporated within that activity. As important as learning to read is the process of how one learns, in what context and for what purposes. This can be seen in the practices of the Vai of Liberia, among which there are three forms of access to

literacy, each in a different institutional setting: the school, where one learns English through texts and problems; the mosque, where one learns Arabic in group recitation of prayer; and the family environment, where one learns to write the Vai script used only to write letters to acquaintances. Each acquisition context is itself an artifact mediator that stimulates different cognitive processes.

Regarding schools, the key issue here is the process of appropriation of artifacts by students: not only with primary artifacts (writing, language appropriated to describe the objects of knowledge, etc.), but with the secondary as well (scripts, appropriated forms of action for each activity, addressing others, etc.). The appropriation of school activity involves knowledge of its goals and standards, and of the terms that guide the conduct of its members.

In the case of gypsy students and other minority groups, failure in the acquisition of primary artifacts (core competencies) cannot be separated from the non-appropriation of secondary artifacts in the form of routines, rituals and uses of language, the set of daily practices whose appropriation is needed to make sense of the school experience. An educational alternative would be an institutional framework that promotes appropriation's practices of cultural artifacts, but such practices should also be appropriated (in the sense of being taken as one's own) by the participants.

Failure in the Appropriation of Motives to Participate in School Practices

Research on cultural discontinuities shows that traditional cultural practices of the communities that children are a part of and the practices derived from participation in the school and its rules can be contradictory (Greenfield/Cocking 1994; Greenfield/Suzuki 2001; Poveda 2001). Hedegaard (2005) adds that this conflict mediates the acquisition of skills, competencies, construction of motives, and in the identity of the child.

Progress in education, understood as the acquisition of skills through school practices, cannot exist outside the motives of the child or the orientation of his or her goal-directed activity and the meaning that is given to it. As Hedegaard suggests, "through shared activities motivated by social practices at home and school, the child learns to combine needs with objects, and then acquires new motives" (2005, p. 193). In other words, there is no progress in schooling (in the appropriation of the practices of that institution) in the absence of motives (goal orientation), because without them the activity is meaningless. Shared motives, engaging in goal-directed activity, is what gives meaning to the subject and is essential for the active participation (not just peripheral, in the terms of Wenger 1998) that is necessary for development.

Motives are a fundamental aspect in the process of identity construction. Children's identities are transformed as they participate in different practices and become members of new institutions. Only through active participation (goal-oriented, with meaning) can schooling be incorporated in the identities of its members. Conversely, when the school practice is peripheral, resistance phenomena appear as well as ethnic differentiation processes by which identity is constructed outside of or in opposition to the school, as Ogbu (1994) indicated in reference to the secondary cultural traits of African Americans, and as also occurs in the Spanish context with groups of

gypsy students (Fernández-Enguita 2004; Fernández-Enguita/Mena/Riviere 2010), but not with other minority groups such as Latino immigrants.

In short, if we think like Hedegaard that “the development of children can be understood as the appropriation of competence and motives to manage daily practices within different institutions, and also to build a sense of who they are and who they want to be in the future” (op. cit. p. 188), the challenge of the school lies in its ability to provide a meaningful activity, setting goals shared by the participants, who in turn incorporate this practice in their identities.

If the school fails to provide meaningful practices for gypsy students, an educational alternative needs to be offered, to make the objectives of its daily practices intelligible and promote their incorporation as motives for the participants. This intelligibility involves establishing narratives for sharing goals and incorporating the participation in the educational institution in the identity of gypsy students (Crespo et al. 2012).

Failure in Establishing Shared Narratives

Every culture has a set of narratives that “objectify” reality (Moghadam 2003), a common way of understanding the world, a shared definition of reality that includes values, hierarchy, priorities, belongings, ways of interpreting the past, desirable goals, etc. On top of this objectified world, intersubjective agreements are established that enable communication and joint activity. Belonging to a cultural community involves the sharing of terms, the ways of categorizing reality that need not be explained because they are taken as a given. Schweder (1984) refers to them as preconceived, unspoken ideas that each cultural community establishes as the basis for understanding.

Understanding the goals of an activity is possible as long as you share a story with the other members of the community (Bruner 1996). To participate in an institution (family, school, work) is to share the stories that indicate and justify the goals of the activity of said institution. Ecological transitions that occur when entering a new scenario are carried out without much difficulty if one maintains the intersubjective agreement about reality. The entry into school of a child from a dominant cultural group is facilitated by the narratives of this institution that share the same referents used by the family, this forms part of a basic agreement on what we are doing together. However, when members of an ethnic minority group with little power in the dominant society attend school, they encounter a world where the rules, language, relationships and objectives of the activity are different from or may even contradict those of their family and cultural group. Although schools generate narratives of all kinds, the ones that are especially relevant are those oriented toward the future; practices are justified not in their immediate usefulness, but for their contribution to a student’s progress. This idea of progress does not correspond with the views of some cultures such as the gypsy population, and this makes the joint construction of community and family discourses with those of the school difficult. Consequently, the peripheral participation of students from these ethnic groups tends to be supported by narratives of the present and immediate future (Lalueza et al. 2001). Furthermore, the narrative of the school often excludes other narratives that are foreign to the mainstream institution, viewing those narratives as interference (Moll et al. 1992;

Poveda 2001). When narratives are not shared, alternative stories emerge, usually constructed in opposition to the dominant narrative, such as the refusal to use the language considered correct by the school, or reluctance to adopt the behaviors of the good student. This is what, according to Ogbu (1994), stimulates the development of secondary cultural differences – identity characteristics built in opposition to the dominant culture (Lalueza 2012).

It is not an immutable fate. Despite cultural differences, some groups as Latin American immigrant arrive to basic agreement with schools based in sharing conceptions about desirable futures for their children: converging the goals of the immigration (social inclusion and prosperity) and the goals of school (social cohesion around dominant values and rationalist development of their pupils).

Thus, the key issue for intercultural education is how the school, an institution that helps define reality according to the dominant culture, can create spaces of intersubjectivity with members of minority groups that support objectifications of the world that differ or are even in opposition to their own. The failure to establish a shared microculture whose meanings are meaningful to all members explains the disaffection on the part of those who do not understand, share or appropriate the narratives that give meaning to school practice.

According to the approach we have developed thus far, we will present in this paper two sections: One, an empirical study based on parents voices about school; Two, an extension of this analysis about the specific alternative developed by the Shere Rom Project. Both sections will be articulated around the three points developed above. They become the research questions of the empirical study and the guide for the analysis of the experience of the Shere Rom project.

Section 1: A Study Based on the Perspective of Families

Method

The study presented here aims to analyze the voice of gypsy families (FG), through 9 interviews with parents of children that attend school (6–13 years old). They live in various districts of Barcelona and its metropolitan area.

According to previously presented differences between minorities in their relationship with school, and with the aim to recognize the specific characteristic of Gypsies as minority, we introduced similar interviews with the same number of Latino immigrant families (FL) living in the same neighborhoods. While our goal is to study the discontinuities between the gypsy families and the school, that may account for the difficulties of this institution regarding integration of this ethnic group members, we have also incorporated Latino immigrant families, a group that is not a part of the social majority, but does not present the same problems of school integration as the gypsy population. Both cultural groups share the characteristic of minority groups whose first language, Spanish, is not that different from the school's principal language, Catalan (a Romance language that shares much of its grammatical structures with Spanish), nor from the language of the majority cultural group. In our study all families are Spanish speakers except two gypsy families whose first language is Catalan. Furthermore, all Latino families, from seven nationalities (Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, República Dominicana and Venezuela)

have been settled in Barcelona for at least 3 years. A total of 18 interviews were analyzed, 9 families from each cultural group.

The script of the interviews was developed from the content of four previous focus groups. One group was held with 7 experts about the gypsy community and another with 5 experts in Latin American immigration. Both focus groups were composed by researchers and largely experienced practitioners. These focus groups were asked to explore the particular conflicts and difficulties of the correspondent cultural group in the Catalan schools. The analysis of the contents of those groups allowed us to do a list of topics that were the script of the third and fourth focus groups, that were conducted with *mediators* from each community (6 *gypsies* and 5 *latinos*). *Mediators* are practitioners who belong to the cultural groups and who work to promote the relationship between families of their own community and schools. Out of these four groups the final script for the interviews to be conducted with families of both cultural groups emerged.

Finally, *mediators*, participants in the two focus groups, became families' interviewers and they selected two or three families from their own community (each mediator selected families considered *collaborative* with school and families considered *distanced* from school). The research team trained them to do interviews with the script developed from the focus groups contents. Families had children of school-going age, and were interviewed (mother, father or both) at families' homes.

In the present research we followed the methodology of content analysis: transcription of the interviews, quotes segmentation, coding, triangulation of the coding realized by the different researchers, and coding of all interviews with the category system thus obtained. The work was supported by Atlas.ti 6.2 software. A set of primary categories emerged directly from data (following the Grounded Theory procedure of Glaser/Strauss 1967).

Here we will not develop the full analysis that led to the group of primary categories that is still in progress. We will focus on the identification of parts of the transcripts that contain content on the argumentation that families use about the schooling of members of their community in accordance with the interpretation of the historical-cultural perspective developed in the previous sections of this article. To do this, primary categories included all quotes extracted to the text of each interview. The information gathered in these primary categories was read in a second turn, and the quotes gathered in three macro-categories.

4 Analysis³

In the study presented here, we will interpret data from a previously developed theoretical model that will help us to understand what it is that gypsy families perceive: a) if the school promotes skills acquisition and appropriation of tools to participate

³ Transcription conventions:

IntL/IntG: Latino interviewer/Gypsy interviewer.

ML/MG: Latino mother/Gypsy mother.

FL/FG: Latino father/Gypsy father

The letter joined to the actor is the neighborhood where the interview is conducted. Moreover, the number shows if it is the first, second or third interview conducted in a neighborhood.

in the practices of that institution; b) if the school promotes appropriation of motives that give meaning to the participation in school practices; and c) if the school facilitates the construction of narratives for sharing meanings and establishing common goals.

a) On the Acquisition of Cultural Tools

The quote transcribed below reflects the sustained perception often expressed by Latino families (hereafter FL), that the school is organized for the gradual inclusion of children coming from immigration backgrounds.

FL_A_1: =so, once he was there he was integrating, integrating integrating, so that:: then they put him in these classes that::, that help more with Catalan:: =

IntL_A_1: =there in the same, in the school=

FL_A_1: =in the school, [in::]

IntL_A_1: [Ah], in the welcome classroom=

FL_A_1: =Exactly, but he was taken out not last year, but now, now, they put him the same as the others, now they don't give it anymore =

IntL_A_1: =ah, so it's like that was the time when he went to those type of reinforcement classes, [there::]

FL_A_1: [exactly]

IntL_A_1: Ok,Ok, [and after that::]

FL_A_1: [he told me] that they had separated him, that::, for almost a year they separated him, he said, he said better. So its like, he says that maybe now:: (---), I don't know, better, but::, you::, you go at your::, at your own pace, and not::, and so far::, we don't have any problems.

In contrast, the second quote shows a different perception, often sustained by gypsy families (hereafter FG), who do not detect that the school offers educational resources that focus on cultural diversity, making it difficult to connect with the school and the cultural tools offered there.

IntG_A_2: That they explain, with with=

MG_A_2: =Their way. Then, for example, right?, maybe it will never happen, but if in a class there was, not a teacher, a gypsy, an assistant, you know? And she could be more with our kids, like see, the teacher explains something and the other:: the assistant would say, look kid, you don't do it like this, you do it like that, and that, and that. Son2G_A_2::, you do it this way, this way and this way. Ok? I know my kid would get it better like that, than the teacher explaining it. Because we have a different way of understanding things, even though in the end its the same.

Each quote has a different interpretation of the educational resources that address cultural diversity. In the case of the FL, despite cultural differences with the school, they welcome the resources available to them. By contrast, the FG do not view the educational resources as addressing diversity. The first group appreciates the opportunities for learning the language of instruction of the school, while the latter speaks of the distance between the uses of language in the school and in the community.

The problem is that the attention to diversity in school focuses on language acquisition, but does not address its cultural forms of use, or the acquisition of other

secondary artifacts such as rituals and habits, which are seen by the school as implicitly shared with families, which is not the case of gypsy families.

b) On the Appropriation of Motives for Participating in School Activities

The Latino community links their future expectations with the schooling of their children, valuing that learning at school will help improve one's opportunities.

ML_E_2: I think that education has always been important and now even more, a lot more and in these times of crisis well, a lot more, I think that right now in this crisis that there are a lot of teachers that don't have work, a lot of people are unemployed and no, education is really important, more than before, now, always and I think that every parent wants our children to be prepared, to be good professionals and to have a good future I think that as parents we all think that

In contrast, the FG values acquiring basic skills (reading and writing), and school learning is only seen as a resource for economic activities when the family can't guarantee them by other means.

MG_B_1: = for example my Son2G_B_1 and my Daughter6G_B_1 started at 12 years old, when they were 13 they left, at 14. What did my son learn in two years? he was in the street more than he was in the class. Because it made him nervous, he was the tallest, they threw him out. El Son2G_B_1 because he didn't go, they threw him out, I want them to have opportunities to learn and the day that I'm not here, they don't know how to put in a plug, they don't know how to put in a light bulb, things that you learn in school, when they teach you, but these kids don't () don't want it.

IntG_A_2: If it wasn't required, would we take them?

MG_A_2: No, we would take them less. We would take them less.

IntG_A_2: So it's because we aren't putting any value in the school, right? Because more than a school it's like day care, a place to park them. Because really, I take them because they require me to and they are telling me I have to take them. But really I don't think that they are going to learn anything.

MG_A_2: Well, no, of course! To learn to read and write, and all that I want my kid to learn, all of that, goodness!

MG_A_1: To study, to know, right? To have a:: to know, to know how to act, to talk to people. They won't go anywhere in this place, if they won't go anywhere, they don't need it, right? So, I can offer them things, so it's not that necessary. But that's really not my case. If you can't offer them anything, they have to study. I think that a mother that doesn't have anything to offer, and doesn't motivate her children to study, is not really a good mother. So, first we would have to educate the mothers, so that those mothers can educate their children.

In both cases the opportunities that schools offer for the work future of their children was recognized as a motivation for schooling. However, in the case of the FG, school is not accepted as an educator, as a shaper of identity, but just as providing some tools, in the case that the traditional economy of gypsy communities would not be enough.

c) On the Construction of Shared Narratives

FL seeks the appropriation of cultural tools offered by the school. The assimilation of the majority culture is sought through the participation in school practices.

IntL_E_1: professionals in what sense?

ML_E_1: the idea of having people that are so different, children that are so different, in the cultures that they can (...) like to unify them like, they're different, but they can do that, they can make them feel like how good to be in Spain, in Catalonia, for example with the Catalan, with all of those things and that they treat them like equals. Another thing that:: I like the little trips that they do a lot=

In contrast, FG seeks to maintain their own culture, perceiving the school as a space that threatens the cultural identity of their children.

IntG_D_1: Yes well, the first. Do you think that the gypsies really want their children to study in school?

MG_D_1: I think so. Now, in the times we live in, because there is a crisis, because there is so much fear that the market doesn't work anymore, to sell for scrap has gone downhill, ehh:: and people don't see any way out, so now yes, now I want you to study in school, but, people are afraid, and the fear is that when the boy or girl, especially the girl, starts to become a young woman, now, the school::, she mixes with people who are not gypsies, and she can:: fall in love with a boy who is not a gypsy, eh:, girls that age should already have a boyfriend, she needs to be learning how to clean, she has to learn how to cook, she has to get married... The boy, well::, if he gets a non-gypsy girl and then brings her home (1). Eh, it's that, now they do things with people who aren't gypsies, they want to go with them everywhere, to the discoteque, to wherever::... Anyway, that we will become non-gypsy and that's what the fear is yes... I think that's what the parents are afraid of [that]

The historical relationship built between families and school influences in the differentiated cultural strategies of relating with the culture of the majority. The FL value positively the incorporation of the cultural tools of the school as there is the expectation that they will offer opportunities for social inclusion and a better future. However, the FG distrust the unequal relationship established between the majority culture and gypsy culture, fearful of losing their culture through the relationship with the majority cultural group and by participating in its institutions. Although some of the tools that the school can provide are valued, there is a fear – historically constructed – of losing one's culture.

While the narratives of the school and of the gypsy community are not only different but are perceived as opposing, it does not appear as viable to build a hybrid cultural identity that can incorporate the cultural tools offered by the school and at the same time maintain the tools and cultural values of the gypsy community.

Section 2: Looking for Alternatives: The Shere Rom Project

In the study presented from interviews with gypsy families and their counterpoint with Latin American families, we sought to incorporate empirical evidence consist-

ent with the formulations of a cultural-historical approach on the reasons for the failure of the inclusion of the gypsy population in schools.

These highlighted difficulties, presented as school failures (not of children or their families), are the obstacles that must be overcome by an inclusive educational project with minority cultures. This is what was intended 16 years ago with an extended education project aimed at overcoming the constraints of the school in relation to gypsy students. The House of Shere Rom was born in 1998 to test a response to the deficient educational inclusion of the gypsy population and the social exclusion that a large part of its members experience. The project's aim was to design a system of activity-based teaching and learning methods that were meaningful. With this goal in mind, an institution was conceived, free of the institutional constraints of the school, which took the form of an extended education program rooted in a gypsy community and that counted on the participation of the community and on the management of the program by the members of that same community. It also used a physical space that was considered as belonging to the community. To do this, we used as models the Fifth Dimension and "La Clase Mágica", communities of extended education developed by the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition (LCHC) of the University of California from the principles of CHAT (Cole 1996; Vásquez 2002). Through a process of negotiation with a local gypsy association (Crespo/Pallí/Lalueza 2002; Crespo et al. 2005) we launched a community of educational practices supported by the use of ICT (information and communication technologies) and located in a community association in a district of Barcelona.

Its operation was based on the cooperation between boys and girls of the community (3 to 14 years old) and college students in service learning practices, to perform tasks with content related to basic schooling skills, but presented in the form of games or collaborative problem-solving challenges. This is set in the context of an activity subject to rules, with explicit short and medium-term goals, with artifacts designed specifically for the activity and with a shared language referring to the rules, goals and activities. *Shere Rom* was a fictional character active on the Internet, presented as a magician, present during the activity, responding to children's questions, and inviting them to narrate their experience through his cards.

This is not the place for detailed descriptions of the Fifth Dimension which can be found in many texts (see Cole/The Fifth Dimension Consortium 2006; Nilsson/Nocon 2005) and is part of the background shared by the rest of the articles in this special issue. What we attempt here is to explain *how* this model responds to the three *failures* in school inclusion of gypsies analyzed in the study presented in the previous section.

What started as a local experience 16 years ago, has led to other communities developing similar extended education communities through collaboration with gypsy associations, and has also been introduced as an innovative educational experience in schools characterized by high concentration of minority groups, especially gypsy students. There are currently eight such experiences operating, four as extended education communities outside school hours, three in primary schools and one in a secondary education institute. In all of the cases, the implementation and design are the result of a negotiating process, with representatives of the reference entity (gypsy association, neighborhood entity, school or institute) using an initial model. However, both the negotiating process and, above all, the development of the activity over time, transforms, so that in each of the sites there is an idiosyncratic activity, distinct

from the others, and adapted to the community and institutional characteristics of that particular environment.

Specific data about interactions in this kind of activity is analyzed in Luque/Lalueza (2013) and Lamas/Lalueza (2012). Here we will restrict our comments to illustrate how the Fifth Dimension approach to the three issues developed in the empirical study presented in the previous section, which analyzes the discontinuity between home and school educational practices and reasons for the failure of the school in the inclusion of gypsy students, offers us clues as to why the Shere Rom project works, why absentee children regularly attend extended education activities, why schools embrace a model that assumes an educational practice totally different from their usual practice using different educational agents (researchers, activity coordinators, university students) and that end up transforming their own dynamic, and why absentee characterized children regularly attend these activities that take place in schools. In other words, it offers information on what basis the communities of educational practices inspired by the Fifth Dimension generate school practices that overcome the failures of institutions for certain minority groups.

a) On the Acquisition of Cultural Tools

The Shere Rom project is adaptable to local cultures because there is not a closed curriculum. If it is realized in a non-formal space such as an association or neighborhood entity, the design has to adapt to the constant interactions with the people and groups involved in the other activities, with families of children (incorporating, for example, younger siblings), as well as with the objectives of the association. If it takes place in a school, the design adapts to the characteristics of the group and the interests of teachers and school dynamics, but it also takes into account the social context, the neighborhood characteristics, and the cultural framework of the community the families and students belong to. It entails, therefore, the explicit consideration of the cultures that converge in the classroom.

Local cultures and mainstream academic culture can be accommodated in a socially productive learning environment. Meaning is not imposed, but a space is created where different interests and motivations can find their place of encounter. First, everyone is "at the border" with their own goals, achievable through joint action: for children there is playing, solving a mystery or expressing their skills; for teachers there is the development of certain student skills; for students there is learning about development and education through practice; and for the active members of the association there is the empowerment of their community through practices that involve the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. As the various artifacts of the activity are appropriated by all the participants, a micro-culture comes to take shape from which shared meaning and goals emerge. When this happens, it means participants have appropriated the model and have made it theirs. Furthermore, development of the program can be managed by them.

b) On the Appropriation of Motives for Participating in the Activity

The relationship between the participants in all communities that follow the Fifth Dimension model is based on collaboration, and the recognition of competence and decision-making. This collaborative learning philosophy is reflected in the structure

of the activity which allows for different paths to be taken depending on the motivations, and on the relationships between learners and experts (or between different learners) that have to agree on how to realize the tasks.

Collaborative work in Shere Rom project promotes the construction of a micro-culture in which adults and children cooperate in the creation of a shared project. This micro-culture creates an interagency space (university, school, social organizations), an intergenerational space (adult professionals, young students and children), and an intercultural space (various institutional, generational and community cultures) where different voices are expressed and where power relationships related to age, gender or cultural background are diluted, generating work dynamics where norms and roles can be negotiated at any time. The adult figure as partner, not as an evaluator of the child, helps to create strong emotional ties that promote the learning process, as well as stimulating greater involvement of everyone in that same process.

c) On the Construction of Shared Narratives

The incorporation of a narrative helps to integrate different tools into a goal-directed and meaningful activity. In the Fifth Dimension model, the activity is presented to children as a story in which one or more characters have a past, present a set of meaningful actions, maintain an ongoing relationship with the participants, and help create a common story shared with a sense of complicity.

The activity is a narrative whole that can be explained in the language of the participants because it has an explicit approach with established rules; it is oriented toward an outcome that can be both the arrival to the end of a path as well as a product that is created and presented collectively. The magician plays an important role in creating this narrative. It is a living character that traces the history of the group, keeping memory alive and encouraging the challenge of future projects.

Authorship, a discourse consciously directed at an audience, is a fundamental element in the construction of meaning, as well as an entry into the meanings of a culture (Bakhtin 1986; Wertsch 1991). The Shere Rom project aims to promote “agentivity” – encouraging competence and awareness among participants so that they can guide their own learning activity through authorship and conscious representation of the audience. In the activity we call *Trovadores* (a storytelling activity, where participants organized in small groups develop short narratives with digital media), boys and girls become agents throughout the process – the decision of what they want to explain is theirs and the review of the quality or adequacy of the work is also theirs. It is they who set the pace, make decisions, reflect, create and act. They take an active role in the dialogue with the spectator and tell their stories from a privileged position, with their own voice. This offers, from the very beginning, the possibility of seeing oneself from another perspective, as authors and participants.

5 Conclusions

The Shere Rom project is not intended to act as an alternative to schools, but as a project transforming educative practices in teachers and organization. Its design

stems from the analysis of the limitations of schools and has been developed in extended education spaces. The experience has stimulated a return to the schools with a proposal of change, attending to the results presented in this paper. Whether realized outside or inside of schools, the key has been to create interagency relationship spaces where the activity makes sense for each entity. This occurs when the legitimate objectives of each entity are incorporated be it an association, a school or a university. As an intergenerational space it should be motivating for the different participants: children, teachers, community agents and students. As an intercultural space it must generate narratives that can be used in different social languages and they must be meaningful to the different communities involved. This is only possible if we view educational intervention as a constant process of negotiation.

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