Sitting on the Cliff: Social Vulnerability as Pedagogy Subject-matter

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The legally compulsory school does not finish for all students equally. In vulnerable neighbourhoods, adolescent dropouts face an uncertain future. If they belong to an ethnic minority, the problem is even more acute. Exploring the geographical expression of social exclusion within a city, it is described therein the situation of suburbs and patterns of life of adolescents in social vulnerability situations. We want to know what they do; how they spend their lives; what are their future prospects. The case study is focused on the period of schooling that they have lived and the contributions that institutionalized education has provided to them. To do that we interviewed 150 young Roma and non-Roma, distributed as minority culture and majority culture. The living space chosen were three districts of the city of Oviedo (Spain) where they live together. On the social portrait presented, we can find materials for discussion and educational reflection, also to improve teacher training.

Keywords: Social exclusion; case study; ethnographic approach; vulnerable groups; inclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Left school without obtaining the minimum qualifications required to provide evidence of basic education is a significant handicap in our societies. With short language skills, math or social knowledge, inclusion problems increases significantly. For some people (27.6% in the

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Spanish case) their transit through compulsory education was not a transcendent episode. In the key-years of adolescence without cognitive structures necessary to face the fluctuations of everyday life, the road to the exclusion appears transparent [1]. Besides, if you are a member of a social minority, things can get even more complicated.

Exclusion is a negative concept, framed in the contexts of social policies, educational contexts and analysis of the welfare societies. To get an idea of social exclusion we must take into account the common use of the expression, the conventional image that identifies a group of people and the general ideas that the term suggests [2]. We use the term exclusion to denote people misaligned of social standard, called *exclus* (misfits) by Lenoir [3]. If we associate social exclusion to segregation [4], the included will be the integrated group and the others, the excluded, are well-defined sectors of the population: single parents, people with low qualifications, elderly, homeless people, disabled, ex-prisoners, women, youth, immigrants, ethnic minorities. Human beings in all cases.

The social and educational intervention must necessarily take into account the prevalence of context. Factors such as adverse economic conditions of the social environment where people live, relational aspects, the processes that lead to the rupture of social bonds and the marginalization of some human groups provide a focus to try to understand the situations of social risk, which act as vectors for social exclusion [5]. Intervention on risk situations reduces the probability of the risk occurring [6]. Undoubtedly, one of the principal risks of exclusion is poverty. Poverty, understood as social exclusion [7] describes lack of economic resources, lack of participation in the labour market and the inability to access other basic goods such as education, health or culture

Ethnic minorities are vulnerable groups at risk of social exclusion. Ethnic groups are entities that emerge from cultural differentiation. When we talk about ethnicity, we mean the set of rules, values and practices shared by a group of persons [8]. Groups or social categories and the fact of belonging to them are associated with positive or negative connotations [9]. So the concept is often used to describe and identify physical characteristics of these groups. Anyway, an ethnic minority is a distinct group within a

society composed of a greater ethnic majority and organized from cultural differences [10]. The Romani ethnic minority has been settled in Spain for centuries and likely constitutes the most ancient case of social exclusion in the country. According to various sources [11] almost one million persons are identified as Roma people in Spain. The identity is the idea that one has about oneself, and it is constructed [12]. That´s not the result of a lonely reflection but a continuous process of social confrontation through which one learns the self-value in relation to others [13,14]. Poverty and marginalization hits this ethnic minority on which persists the problem of unequal opportunities and social discrimination [15].

Aprioristic judgments often insist that education is the remedy for all social illnesses. However, from the pedagogic system it is difficult to be so assertive. Education can help to eradicate social exclusion, of course, but it also can help to maintain it. Spain, like its European neighbours, sets the goals of education: The importance of training in coexistence, rejecting all forms of discrimination and disrespect for a culture and a flexible organization of the education system under the principle of inclusion, to ensure fairness and transmission of democratic values. Placing social exclusion in the field of school failure can be an exercise of logical propositions [16]. We cannot say that the school avoids exclusion without understanding what happens in the social environment or without repairing the apparent collision between school culture and the culture of origin of students [17]. Roma parents, who have been often forced to school their children against their will [18], have few experiences of successful schooling. They rarely receive good news from it [19,20]. Bad school experiences such as poverty syndrome is transmitted between generations [21]. The mechanism of socialization that involves the school fails with the Roma ethnic minority and Romani teenagers leave school out with poor social skills and the cultural invariants dichotomized. These teens often lack academic or professional qualification. They seem strong candidates for social exclusion. Besides the ethnic gap, important in itself, and historical prejudices against the Roma cultural minority [22], adolescence is a group at risk. It has its own styles of socialization in a biological stage marked by the transition to adulthood with the process of emancipation from family. To get there goes through a phase of occupational or academic education, which continues to

vocational - learning, professional full transition - and social insertion. However, the path of life is not so linear and there are difficulties: Poverty levels among young people (aged 16 to 34 years) do nothing but grow since the beginning of the economic crisis of 2008 [23] and not all are Romani.

The human geography of the neighbourhoods offers multiple perspectives of analysis. A particular group, a specific problem, and depending on the scientific approach, an appropriate methodology can help to describe and interpret the problem [24]. We want to know what they do; how they spend their lives; what are their future prospects. In this case, we want to know how they do for living young people that failed to the goals that education had designed for them and besides, it toward that uncertain future there may be an ethnic bias. To make a suitable comparison, to consider the same living environment, we could do fieldwork in three districts of the city of Oviedo (43° 2145´N, 005° 51´05W) where Romani and non-Roma adolescents coexist. The aim were to explore the living space of the young paying special attention to the levels of interculturality that they handle [25-27] and social inclusion they have, to analyse their situation and their academic and professional standards

2. METHODOLOGY

This work was carried out in the city of Oviedo (capital town of Asturias, north of Spain) and therein, three districts where people with different patterns of socialization they share problems of vulnerability and social exclusion [28].

We had a representative sample of 150 youngsters, aged between 14 years - who are still mandatory in school - and 20 years - as the intangible limit of adolescence. They were distributed according to age, gender and ethnicity: 75 adolescents were Romani (minority culture) and 75 adolescents were non-Roma (majority culture) (Table 1).

The fieldwork was organized in sequences of approximation [29]. In a first step, the objective was to know the social reality of the districts, that is, the environment where the adolescents grow and develop in their real life [30], going over infrastructures and public facilities in each neighbourhood: location, resources and community social initiatives. This mental map of social resources offered observation units that complemented the own researcher's observation notes [31]. The observation units developed the next approximation sequence through exploratory interviews [32] with different social actors working and/or living in each district. Employing this type of interview were collected the views of four Social Workers, two Sociocultural Animators, six members of districts associations, one Elementary School Advisor, one High School Advisor, one Social Centre Librarian, one Director of Primary School and one Director of Child Care. The approach of the interviews was to record their impressions on the quality of life in each neighbourhood and to collect the indicators of risk experienced by district and professionals about the vital issues of young people associated with social exclusion and vulnerability.

The last sequence was the direct contact with the young people taken as a case study [33]. To facilitate dialogue with them was used an open-ended *Questionnaire-Guide* [34] to channel individual and group interviews. This allowed to extracting data that reveal the social reality they considered significant. For this, an index of exclusion factors [35] was adapted and distributed in three levels: Family Links; Educational/Professional Training and Social Experiences.

Approached with emphatic presentations in informal gatherings [36], once the appropriate communication was established, they were told in an intelligible language about the purpose and

Table 1. Sample studied

Neighbourhoods	Majority culture			Minority culture		
	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total
Districts 1	14	11	25	13	12	25
Districts 2	10	15	25	11	14	25
Districts 3	12	13	25	10	15	25
Total	**36**	**39**	**75**	**34**	**41**	**75**
Average age	**16.7**	**17.4**	**17.05**	**16.7**	**17.7**	**17.2**

destination of the research. They were provided with full explanations, inviting them to read first the topics in the form of open questions that were formulated and obtaining their permission to analyse and publish (if pertinent) the answers; always keeping confidentiality. The potential sample, boarded by the investigator, was spontaneously expanded in a cumulative manner due to the involvement of new youngsters contacted by their friends, which showed interest in responding to the *Questionnaire-Guide*. The data analysis methodology was based in a content analysis [37] of the units of observation and a descriptive and relational analysis [38] of the *Questionnaire-Guide*. With this procedure, data collected from 150 youngsters were coded in an IBM SPSS Statistics 22 program database to analysed and represent the results.

3. RESULTS

3.1 First Step of Approximation

Data on key indicators of the risk perceived by persons who live and/or work in each neighbourhood.

Social agents interviewed cited truancy, trafficking and drug consumption, unemployment, and the large concentration of Roma families in social housings, among the leading causes on perceived risk in everyday living spaces. In addition, they added the uncomfortable feeling of insecurity when they are with them, and thefts and assaults to which they have witnessed. Since their professional perception manifest the importance to them of geographical exclusion, as it represents an imperceptible barrier to the social advancement of these adolescents.

3.2 Second Step of Approximation

Results from the interviews with young people according to gender and ethnic origin (Table 2).

3.2.1 Family links

In the cultural minority, extended nuclear family predominates. There were more varieties of familial clustering in the cultural majority (Fig. 1).

3.2.2 Education / Professional training

Successful schooling is different from one culture to another and gender factor it seems involved in future-oriented studies (Fig. 2).

Table 2. Questionnaire-guide results

Factors of social exclusion	Majority culture		Minority culture	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
1. Family links				
● Type of nuclear family composition	64%	49%	100%	93%
● Other family groups	36%	51%	0%	7%
2. Education / Professional training				
● Primary Education complete	100%	100%	100%	85%
● Secondary Education complete	100%	72%	23, 5%	32%
● Diversification program	1%	79%	2%	36, 5%
● Continuing in the High School or Professional training	11%	31%	0%	0%
3. Social experiences				
● Unemployment	97%	95%	100%	54%
● Social Services users	14%	15%	100%	100%
● Cohabitation supports	64%	43, 5%	91%	83%
● Activities inter groups	14%	85%	3%	36, 5%
● Participates in social activities	22%	41%	29%	15%
● Self-exclusion	11%	61, 5%	73, 5%	100%
● Living in a slum	42%	72%	53%	85%
● Be social: Of a society that embraces	86%	20, 5%	41%	17%
● Drugs consumption	58%	85%	6%	93%
● Problems with the law (arrests, jail)	8%	38%	3%	95%
● Prophylactics in sexual practices	94%	15%	41%	12%
● Expectations on future	89%	92%	76%	56%
Interviewees grand total	**36**	**39**	**34**	**41**

3.2.3 Social experiences

We inquire during interviews on social experiences experienced by these young people. Significant differences related to employment and the life experiences were found in a vulnerable environment (Fig. 3).

Not so in terms of their future prospects. Belonging to one or another culture of origin and the fact of being a woman or man it provided differential data (Fig. 4).

4. DISCUSSION

From data derived on key indicators of the risk perceived by persons who live and / or work in each neighbourhood, we also collect their own personal feelings. Thereby, they added the uncomfortable feeling of insecurity they had when they were in their presence, and thefts and assaults they had witnessed. Since their professional perception manifest the importance to them of geographical exclusion, as it represents an imperceptible barrier to the social advancement of these adolescents.
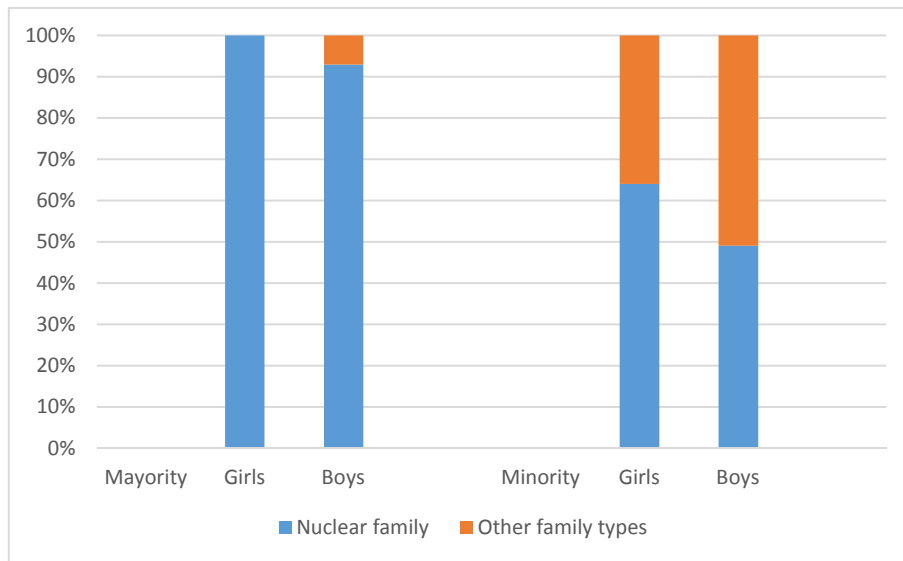

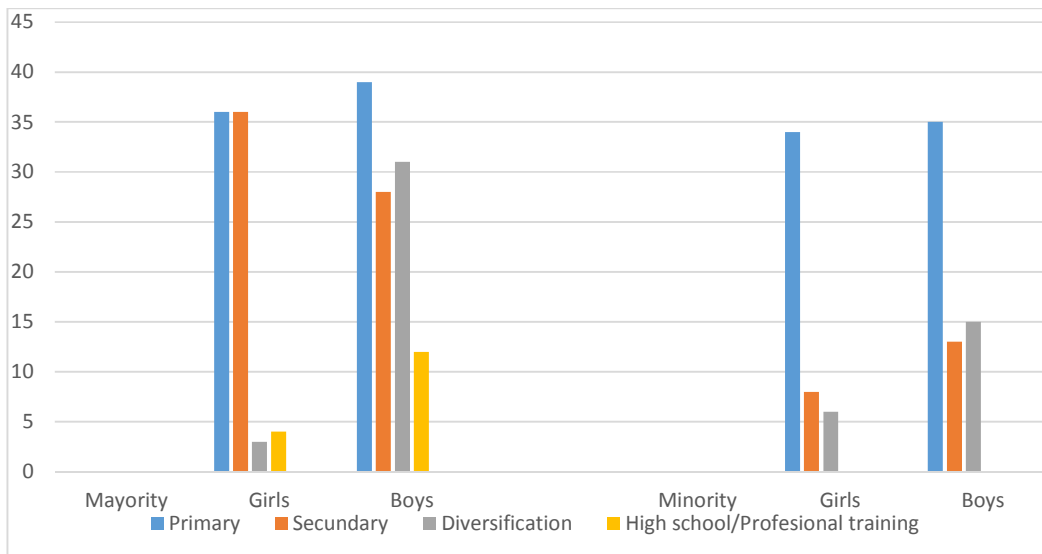**Fig. 1. Family links by ethnicity and gender**

Fig. 2. Education and professional training by ethnicity and gender
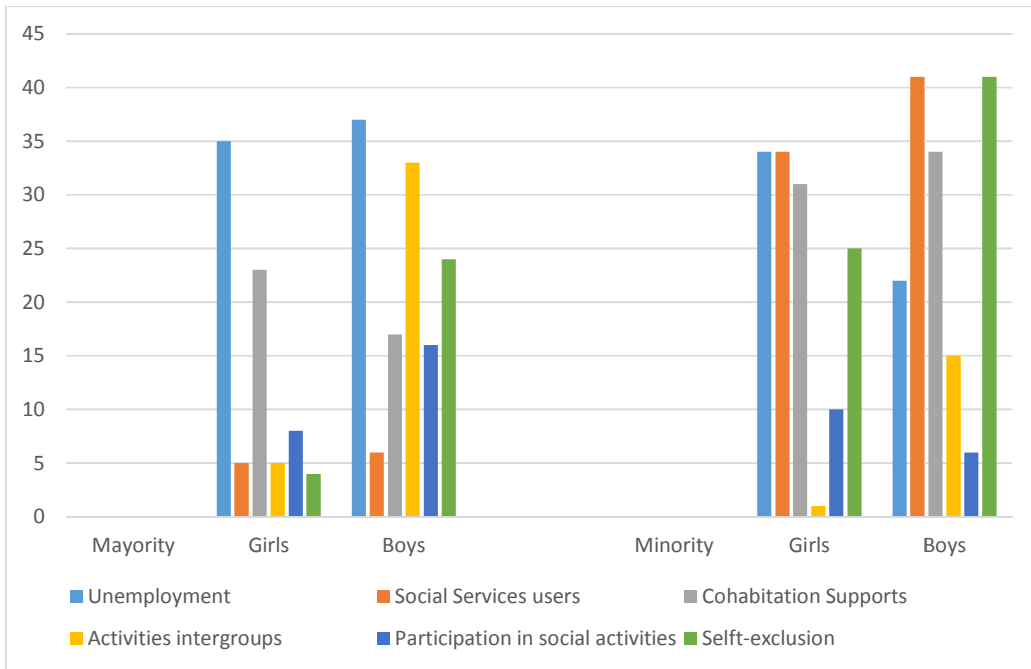
251

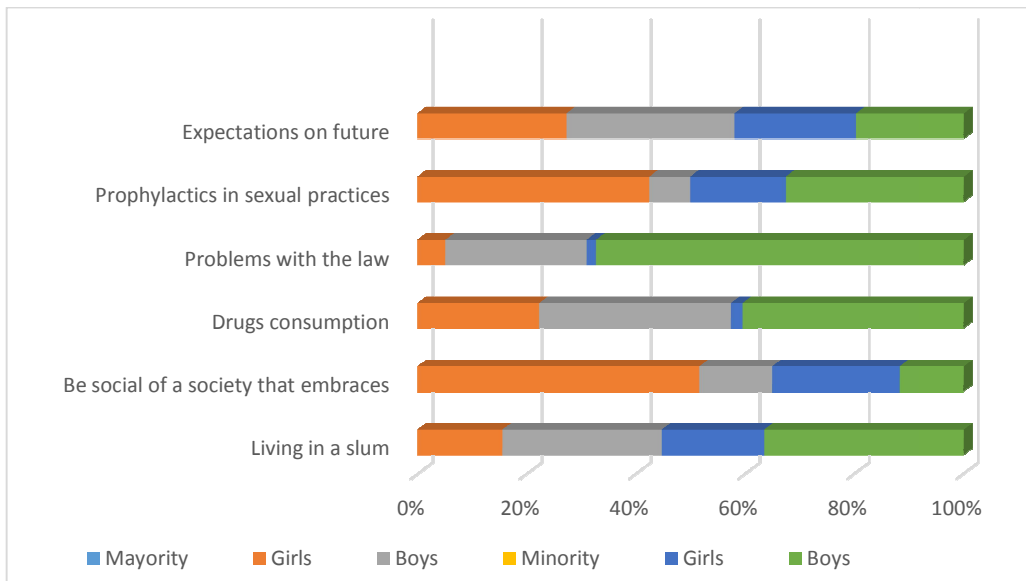**Fig. 3. Social experiences by ethnicity and gender**

Fig. 4. Social experiences by ethnicity and gender

From the data that was provided by youth, we can see striking similarities and differences. Extended nuclear family that predominates in the cultural minority is characterized by several generations of a family sharing the same home. These youth manifested good relationships with parents. However, among the majority culture where more varieties of familial clustering were detected, family relationships commented by young people were revealed as conflicting. Amongst the minority, divorced families or families with contributions from children of previous marriages or civil unions are practically negligible.

Successful schooling begins at the level of primary and here we see that Romani children begin to develop their disaffection from school (85% of the sample does not go beyond this stage). The untying of the education system is more stark among Roma girls when they reach the stage of secondary (Secondary graduation is achieved only by 23.5%) being a constant their presence in diversification programs within the High School and none since the end of compulsory school age. Of Roma boys that promoting from primary to secondary, only 32% achieve graduation at Secondary, with a significant support from diversification programs (36.5%). At the end of this level, only 19.5% decided to continue their education, opting for programs of professional qualification. In the cultural majority, it seems that the stage of primary education is rooted in the tradition of school: all children promoted toward the secondary. Among boys, 72% obtained the graduate in Secondary with considerable support of programs to diversify the curriculum (79%). Although less than a half of respondents continued their studies, those that did it have a trend towards professional qualification programs (43.5%) compared with whom chose high school or training programs (31%). The girls of the cultural majority that completed Secondary almost did not use the programs to diversify the curriculum (1%). However, it is striking their little enthusiasm for further studies. Only 11% of them advanced to higher education or training programs and 17% were oriented towards professional qualification programs.

There was a higher proportion of unemployed young people within the cultural majority than amongst the youth of the cultural minority. Although almost all the girls of the two cultures were unemployed, Roma boys claimed perform a paid work (54%) in the family, generally related to the sale of goods.

There were significant differences between the cultural minority and majority in the demand for access and assistance to basic social services: The minority has managed to consolidate a chronic dependence from the public assistance (100%). The cultural majority uses Social Services as a last resource for survival and in situations of economic vulnerability occurrence (15% of families of the boys and 14% of families of the girls).

Cohabitation between cultural minority and majority is strongly supported. Girls are more in favour of it (64% of those belonging to the cultural majority and 91% of Roma girls). Nevertheless, the data show that this support is more a will than a reality because the girls of the cultural minority do not perform intergroup activities (1%) and non-Roma girls do not massively participate in such activities (14%). Interestingly non-Roma boys declare to do more intergroup activities (85%) than boys do from the ethnic minority (36.5%). In any case, participation in recreational and leisure activities is low in both groups, although it is slightly higher amongst the majority than in the minority.

Youngsters admit to having received training on racial differentiation in their childhood both at home and at school. The perception of marginalization is higher in the minority (100% of boys and 73.5% of girls) and it refers to the phenotype characteristic of the Roma ethnic. The male youth of the cultural majority (61.5%), experience more self-perception of social exclusion, as a reaffirmation. This is episodic in the girls (11%). The personal perception of being marginalized from the social context is significant in the three districts studied regardless of the culture of origin (72% of the majority and 85% the minority), the description as a *slum* area of residence is used almost in unison in both cultures. Amongst the girls, although important, this perception is not as sharp, 42% of non-Roma girls and 53% of Roma girls believe that their neighbourhood is marginal. The young boys from both cultures exhibit as the most distinguishing feature the flatly assertion that they are not part of the social community: only 20.5% of boys of the majority and 17% of the minority they feel be a part of society. However, while for the first group it is a typical behaviour for the second group it is more a reaffirmation of belonging to a distinct community that lives outside the cultural majority. They claim that they are not equal to the majority, understanding that the majority is the most typical way of life. Amongst girls, the feeling of social belonging is stronger among young non-Roma (86%) than among Roma girls (41%).

The ethnic origin, majority/minority, is irrelevant with respect to drug use in boys: the patterns of alcohol, cocaine, hashish and pills consumption are widely followed by both cultures (85% and 93% respectively). There is also a matter of gender: 58% of the girls from the cultural majority follow those habits of consumption that is recognized by only 6% of the Roma girls. The troubles with the law is basically a matter of

boys, and between them, Roma guys have had more troubles with the law (95%) than non-Roma guys (38%).

In the interviews with these young people, serious behaviour disorders in sexual practices were identified. The proportion of young Roma who did not use prophylactic measures in their sexual practices is very high, only 12% of boys and 41% of girls claimed to take any precaution. The young non-Roma boys also seemed to be less aware of the risks incurred by not practicing safe sex, such STDs or unwanted pregnancies: 15% said to use preventive measures. The girls of the majority culture assured (94%) that they employed protective measures in their sexual practices. They stated to have received more information about this issue at school than by direct teaching in the family.

Finally, on the future, both cultural groups fed high hopes, non-specific. Despite the conditions of social vulnerability, as expressed, more than ¾ of the total youth thought that everything would be better later on, without knowing precisely how or why.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The construction of a social map was a useful tool to focus research on the three cohabitation environments. Meet the context of life of adolescents of both cultures it helped to remove misconceptions in the research process. During the exploratory fieldwork, both teachers as social agents interviewed expressed concerns about the major perceived exclusion of teenagers from each neighbourhood and their characteristic vulnerability in their living environment. Overall, they offered a panoramic view of cohabitation within a degraded urban environment despite an apparent functionality and modern architectural resources. A relational environment that is perceived as aggressive, that produced feelings of dislocation and breakdown in the patterns of civic behaviour. All these elements interact with the experiences of these young people, but it may not be considered separately. In this perspective of intersectionality [39,40] we have analyzed contradictory experiences and perceptions that generate conflicts that may be mediated from the socioeducative intervention.

Within the family environment, it has been clearly reflected the rigidity that the family institution exerts on the Roma youngsters. The distinctive roles of the traditional family, where men have

reserved exclusively the prerogative of all power, are the stagnant atmosphere where young Roma people grow up. This does not necessarily facilitate social exclusion, but it flatly denies the freedom of women. Identification with cultural patterns allegedly inherited by ethnic origin [41] need to be subjected to rational criticism of culture in the XXI century.

In the educational aspects, little seems to have made the School for all these young people. If they came to school from an environment of exclusion, they have left it to continue in that same exclusion environment. The results clearly shows that the problem of exclusion begins to be detected in school, in the transition from primary to secondary where Roma children find it difficult to adapt to the educational model that school imposes. One might question the training of teachers to address diversity. If teachers are prepared to take care of these vulnerable groups. If they receive specific training in the Faculties of Education. If we can train students for inclusion in an environment where they have acquired their status as excluded. The state of education affects all schools from vulnerable environments but the educational models developed on the Roma minority persist in the assimilation and cultural integration [42]. Perhaps it is now time to questioning why the young Roma do not complete their studies, have more difficulties in accessing the labour market and they are subject to obsolete cultural prejudices. The school must take responsibility over those young Roma who leave the education system early, too early in the girl's case. The integrative education and cultural contact with non-Roma youth only provides similarities between them based on their social vulnerability.

In terms of professional qualifications, the lack of practical training for employment, which were identified in the results, it could be determinants in the personal development of these young people. Only youngsters of the cultural majority choose programs of professional qualification, girls ignore it, and the cultural minority are engages in black economy spaces. That hinder their present condition and mortgage their future. A shortcut could be the goal of non-formal education because now they are outside the regular school system. The example of these young people would be extrapolated to other young people in other cities who also went to school without her has been very helpful to them. A serious pedagogical purpose for inclusion could be to develop conscience strategies in any

educative space, from classrooms to the corners of every streets.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author declares that no competing interests exist

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