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Voices and Agencialities in the Education of Young Rural Andean Women: A Qualitative Look

Voces y agencialidades en la educación de la joven rural andina: una mirada cualitativa

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Abstract

This qualitative study describes the voices and agencialities of female rural Andean students enrolled in high school. The study explores how educational practices and discourses in the school and family context impact these young women's voices and agencialities. Also analyzed are the actions they are taking to change their existing situation. The post-structural approach and theories of resistance, voice and power inform the literature review and analysis of the study, which describes the many educational and sociocultural obstacles the young women face: an educational curriculum not adapted to their needs, untrained teachers with low expectations for their students' future, and an educational environment that silences their voices. The results show that despite of all obstacles, these women have a firm determination to seek a different future, rather than

live under the oppressive patriarchal cycle their mothers and female relatives have endured.

Keywords: Gender, educational strategies, secondary education.

Resumen

El presente estudio cualitativo describe las voces y agencialidades de estudiantes andinas rurales inscritas en la escuela secundaria. El estudio explora la forma en que las prácticas educativas y discursos en el contexto escolar y familiar impactan las voces y agencialidades de estas jóvenes; asimismo, se analizan sus acciones para cambiar su situación actual. El enfoque post-estructural y las teorías sobre resistencia, voz y poder informan la revisión de literatura y análisis del estudio, mismo que describe los numerosos obstáculos educativos y socioculturales que enfrentan estas jóvenes: un currículo educativo no adaptado a sus necesidades, maestros/maestras sin preparación y con bajas expectativas sobre el futuro de sus estudiantes y un ambiente educativo que silencia sus voces. Los resultados señalan que a pesar de todos los obstáculos, estas jóvenes están firmemente decididas a buscar un futuro diferente en lugar de vivir bajo el ciclo patriarcal y opresivo que han padecido las mujeres de sus núcleos familiares.

Palabras clave: Género, estrategias educativas, educación secundaria.

I. Introduction

Despite the fact that Peru has expanded educational opportunities during the last two decades, its basic educational system faces problems of poor-quality instruction, lack of equity, weak administration, insufficient financing, and inadequate infrastructure. The proportion of students attending school is relatively high compared to other Latin American countries. However, the achievement level of those who graduate is low. Peru has the largest proportion of students (80 percent) at Level I and below, which indicates that students are having serious difficulties using reading to advance and extend their knowledge and skills in other areas (OECD & UNESCO, 2003). Important factors contributing to this low quality of education include: a scarcity of quality teaching materials; a lack of water, sewage, and electrical services; unsafe, unstable school buildings; inappropriate teaching methods; and deficiencies in the curriculum's scope, sequence, and adaptability (CEPAL/ UNESCO, 1992; Cespedes, 2005).

Another problem commonly seen, particularly in rural classrooms, is teachers' strict, authoritative treatment of students. This treatment is especially harmful for female students, diminishing their self-esteem and limiting their learning opportunities. Physical and emotional intimidation through shouting and yelling makes students, especially girls, feel they are not able to learn, and not smart enough to be at school (Tovar, 2004; Karlekar, 2000). These actions restrict student participation in the classroom, and silence their voices within the school setting.

This study is a qualitative inquiry into young rural Andean women's voices and agencialities inside and outside educational settings; it is also a call for national authorities as well as local communities and families to take action and address this issue. The young women who participated in this study live in a rural community with an estimated population of 1,900 people, located in the Peruvian central Andes at 3,500 meters over sea level. Agriculture is the community's main economic activity, and is generally performed manually, requiring the participation of the whole family.

In order to analyze and reflect on these study issues, I use the post-structural approach, and theories of power, voice and resistance. I first explain the country's socio-educational context, based on analysis supported by research concerning the impact of schooling in rural groups. Next, I describe how the post-structuralist approach gives us various ways of exploring the socio-educational processes inside and outside the school. I also look at the approaches to power, resistance, voice, and agency in assisting my analysis of school practices and its agents. Finally, I present the methodology and findings, and provide recommendations for future research.

II. The socio-educational context

While rural women's educational needs and dilemmas have repeatedly been discussed, and numerous governmental programs have been created in an attempt to address this issue, more than one-and-a-half million female students living in rural areas still face daunting obstacles throughout their educational experiences. Questioning young rural women between the ages of 12 and 17, Céspedes (2005) found that one in four had already dropped out of school. Late enrollment in school, poverty conditions, a curriculum unrelated with their sociocultural reality, and multiple responsibilities at home and in the field make it very difficult for them to finish school. (Uccelli, 1999; Rumrill, 2001; Ames, 1999; Estabridis & Carbonel, 2001).

As in other Latin American countries, a Peruvian family's socio-economic conditions define its children's success or failure in school. In the rural region, students are likely to come from marginalized groups with high levels of malnutrition. A low rate of graduation and high rate of desertion correlate with parents' low educational levels, the deficient application of an appropriate intercultural bilingual curriculum, and poor conditions of infrastructure.

Even if a student is able and determined to finish school, the national curriculum does not adapt itself to rural Peruvian multicultural and multilinguistic realities. An appropriate curriculum, if available, would require prepared teachers able to adjust it to multiple educational contexts that include a diverse group of students with varying learning levels, grades and ages (Ramirez, 2004; Tovar, 2004; Sanchez & Vasquez, 2002). Gender gaps are more evident in rural than urban areas. Only 14 percent of rural 17-year-olds graduate from high school, as compared with 49.3

percent in urban areas (INEI, 2001); female students represent the majority of the drop-outs. School can be a positive force for female students, since the recesses provide an important socialization environment which distances girls, although for only few hours, from their multiple responsibilities at home and in the fields, and allows them to share their life experiences with their peers. However, the classroom itself is a hostile setting in which students' voices are silenced by authoritative teachers who damage girls' self-esteem and discourage them from continuing their education.

Rural students, both male and female, are less likely to receive a quality education. The most frequently used teaching methods in rural schools are repetition, memorization, and short answers (Godenzzi, Flores, & Ramirez, 2000). Classes are constantly cancelled, not only due to holidays and other celebrations, but also due to teachers' chronic absences. Even when these teachers are present, many are often inadequately prepared to work with the special needs of a rural student population, and probably lack even minimal teaching materials (Karlekar, 2000).

Despite the large number of programs and initiatives applied in Peru's educational sector, there is still much to do to end inequality and exclusion among rural and poor communities. A report developed regarding four sub-regions of the American continent, including Peru, stressed that the offer of wider education existing in some of the region's countries has not resulted in the achievement of universal basic education or the completion of the compulsory school cycle, especially in rural areas. High rates of students' repeating grade levels; enrolling in school late both in their childhood and in the academic year; dropping out of school (Winkler, 2000); and a generally low graduation rate show that the concept of equal educational opportunities yet remains to be achieved. Students' failures in school, caused by the above factors, are significantly more recurrent in the most disadvantaged social sectors, and for some countries, in rural and indigenous populations.

2.1 The education myth

Education in Peru has gone through many stages and reforms which have impacted the less favored social groups in different historical moments, as described above. Ames (2002) stressed that the notion of schooling has gone from an instruction that "scares children" (Ortiz, 1971, cited in Ames, 2002, p. 21) and smothers their cultural identity, to the "contemporary school myth" (Montoya, 1980, cited in Ames, 2002, p. 22) that places the Quechua language, culture, traditions, and illiteracy in a negative light, as compared to the superior and "enlightened" Spanish language, literacy practices, and Western traditions.

Education has been understood, in Ansion's (1995) terms, as a fundamental part of people's progress and well-being. It has been seen as a central component of national development and as a vehicle for social mobility. This view has been called the education myth that influences rural and indigenous groups' perception

of their access to the urban world. Studies on rural communities during the 70's found that education was seen as an important method of permitting their future access to the market.

Ames (2002) stressed that the view of education as a tool for acculturating the countryside into the urban world has caused conflicts based on the idea of the school's acting as an agent which provides access to knowledge and urban and modern practices, but which also denies students' local and traditional practices. In spite of the diverse problems that students find in their scholastic education, it still holds the promise, particularly in rural regions, of overcoming underdevelopment, poverty and discrimination.

Education is seen as a way to find a place in society, become recognized, and climb the social ladder. It is also perceived as a way to shed "peasant" status and give opportunities to their children, potentially removing them from the harsh manual labor of rural farming. To these rural groups, education means the possibility of being somebody, knowing other places, going to the city and finding a job (Ames, 2002). Similarly, a study on rural families' support for their children's education showed that contrary to what has been said, and in spite of their difficult living conditions, rural families make great efforts to educate their children; rural families highly value education. Contrary to the assumption that students' failure at school is a result of parents' disinterest, the study affirmed that the schools themselves are the most significant factor responsible for rural students' failure, due to their refusal to consider students' learning levels, and their ignoring of students' abilities as well as their families' participation in the scholastic experience (Uccelli, 1999). In spite of rural families' concern for their children's education, the educational system has not yet responded to the rural communities' needs and expectations for educational services. In the following paragraphs, I review these socio-educational issues in the light of four theoretical approaches.

2.2 A post-structural approach to understanding educational practices

A definition of post-structuralism demystifying the master narrative, described it as a disbelief, skepticism, or suspension of belief in universal truth. It is, instead, a focus on the various master narratives, disciplines, or theories as regimes of truth—as historical and socially-constructed knowledge with varying and unequal relation to various power apparatuses (Middleton, 1993, quoted in Ropers-Huilman, 1998). This view opens new possibilities for the application of this philosophy and approaches to specific situations and discourses.

The view of post-structuralism stresses that it has a particular interest in critiquing the way in which competing forms of knowledge, and the power interests they serve, aspire to fix meanings once and for all. The seminal work of the French theorists Foucault and Derrida has contributed interrelated, yet contrasting perspectives on the ways in which cultural practices are constituted by the struggle to produce, stabilize, regulate, challenge and resist dominant meanings (Baxter,

2003). Thus, the post-structuralist quest is to create spaces that will allow the voices of marginalized groups such as women, the disabled, or the gay community to be heard with ringing clarity as well as to question, articulate, and disrupt practices that silence or exploit such subject groups (Harris, 2001).

Based on the poststructuralist view in the field of education, Kenway & Modra (1992) maintained that students' identities are not rational and unitary. Instead, they are seen to be shifting and fragmented, multiple and contradictory, displaced and positioned, as students face the various discourses which historically and currently constitute their lives in and out of school. Classroom dynamics consist of a discourse of domination and subordination, and power and resistance; the extent to which girls are powerful or powerless in the classroom depends upon the positionings which are available, and which they then occupy (Walden & Walkerdine, 1985, cited by Kenway & Modra, 1992).

III. Dimensions of power and resistance in education

According to Foucault, power can be acquired, seized, or shared—something that one holds on to, or allows to slip away. Power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations. It comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled as the root of power relations (Foucault, 1981). Further, Foucault stated that power is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing; power is not an institution, and not a structure; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.

The exercise of power raises the following issues: how power and power relations interact; how power is exerted in terms of language; who has access to the various types of discourse; who can and cannot talk to whom, in which situations, and about what. The more powerful the people, the larger their verbal possibilities in discourse; furthermore, persons with power (in educational institutions, for instance) determine the course of interaction (exert control over discourse and exercise a particular kind of influence) and the issues discussed, as well as decide the beginning and end of such interactions (Wodak, 1995; Robinson, 1995, Branson & Miller, 1995).

As for discourses of resistance, Corson (1993) stated that they provide a form of counter-control that opposes aspects of the cultural capital of dominant groups; the discourses are used to interrogate the dominant culture. However, the school attempts to resist the culture of subordinate groups, perhaps by proscribing the use of minority languages or the language varieties of social groups, for example. This will not completely resist the culture of the subordinate groups, however, "because cultural reproduction operates outside the school, as well as through it," and therefore "the cultures of resistance are never eliminated" (p.16). As soon as power relations become blocked and hierarchical, and as soon as resistance itself becomes aligned with power and creates the potential for further domination,

resistance becomes truly necessary (Newman, 2001). In their study on school settings, Barton et al (2003) noted that resistance is an active process which students use to make claims to their own space in schools, and by which students and teachers negotiate control over identity and voice, what schooling is about, and relationships, as described next.

IV. Whose voice, whose agency?

In her analysis on the use of space and voice as sites of problematic gendered agency among young women at school, Gordon (2006) found that students are expected to be active and operate as individual adult citizens, but that their opportunities to perform as citizens are limited. The opportunities students have in constructing themselves as agentic speaking subjects are curtailed, and opportunities for exercising agency are distinguished because of the differences between girls and boys; when girls enter the space of learning in an overtly agentic manner, there is a tension between their agency and their gender. In addition, it was noted that girls have to balance themselves between agency and subjectification in order to use their voices and bodies in educational spaces.

The use of voice and experiences among students was also analyzed in Mitra's (2004) study, where it was found that efforts to increase student voice can create meaningful experiences that help to meet the developmental needs of youth, particularly for those students who otherwise would not find meaning in their school experiences. The use of work groups helped (1) to instill agency in students, or the belief that they could transform themselves and the institutions that affect them; (2) to acquire the skills and competencies to work toward these changes; and (3) to establish with adults and peers, meaningful relationships that create greater connections.

Issues of agency and voice such as these are critical in the current socio-political discussions on education and its acting participants. For Ahearn (2001), agency refers to the socioculturally-mediated capacity to act. That is, all action is socioculturally mediated, both in its production and in its interpretation. The understanding of agentic acts may differ from society to society; likewise, the interpretation of an individual act may differ from society to society as well. It is equally important to ask how people conceive of their own actions, and whether they attribute responsibility for events to individuals, fate, deities, or other animate or inanimate forces.

The social cognitive theory is similarly linked to this sociocultural view of agency. As Martin (2004) maintained, agency is the capability of individual human beings to make choices and to act on these choices in ways that make a difference in their lives. Agency emerges from the participation of a developing human being in the physical and sociocultural world. It is the activity of a biological human individual in worldly context that somehow enables the development of agentic capability.

An assumption connected to reclaiming agency and voice is that women lose or deny their 'true' voices in response to the oppressive nature of social and cultural expectations for women. In some cases, women go underground with their voices and knowledge; these voices will not only be lost to the young women, but they will be absent from the public arena, and the traditional voices and messages will continue to dominate both the personal and public world of relationships (Dorney, 1995). Further, in a study on women's psychology and girls' development it was found that girls lose trust in the authority of their own experiences. This loss of trust, and of voice, happens differently for girls of different racial, class, and cultural backgrounds (Rogers, 1993, cited by Hayes, 2000, p. 95); for girls of all backgrounds, however, "silence is first used as a means of self-protection, to avoid the threats to relationships that could result from the voicing of unacceptable thoughts and emotions" (Hayes, 2000, p. 95).

V. Study methodology

This qualitative study describes voices and agencies of female rural Andean students pursuing a secondary education. It explores how practices and discourses in schools and households affect their voices and agencially, as well as addressing these young women's actions to change the status quo of their lives.

Data gathered for this study was derived from participant observation, focus-group discussions, interviews, and educational documents. The participants in this study were twelve female rural Andean students between the ages of 15 and 20, who were enrolled in their last two years of high school. The observations and interviews also included students' families, teachers, community, and school personnel.

Data collected in this study followed guidelines for description of data and the process of data collection; organization/categorization of data into concepts; connection of data to show how one concept may influence another; corroboration/legitimization by evaluating alternative explanations and disconfirming evidence; and reporting the findings (Schutt, 2001). Most of the collected data involved analytic files, field notes, field reports, audiotapes, videotapes, pictures, and written documents. The next step after the transcription, coding, and comparison/contrast process was the interpretation of the data.

VI. *Descubriendo voces* (Discovering voices): Interpretation of findings

Even though there are studies that focus on the primary education of the rural socio-educational condition, there is still a lack of studies that describe issues of voice and agency in the educational and social experiences of female rural Andean adolescent students enrolled in high school. Thus, the questions of this study explore the socio-educational experiences of female rural adolescent students in the Andean region of Peru, with the purpose of providing information toward understanding the educational and cultural factors that impact these students'

voices and participation within their schools and households. Since this study was qualitative in nature, its goal was to provide specific, in-depth information on issues that impact female rural Andean students' educational experiences.

The three main themes which emerged from the data analysis: socio-educational factors that impact students' participation, the rural society's socio-educational discourses, and the issues of voice and agency. In the first theme, **socio-educational factors that impact students' participation**, the existing literature notes that the curriculum is designed to be adapted to the rural realities; however, the rural teacher applies a single urban curriculum that s/he does not understand and does not adapt to the cultural and linguistic reality of his or her rural environment. Class observations in this study corroborated findings of local studies on rural educational contexts that described teachers as individuals whose training has been based on a traditional curriculum; they are prepared to transmit a single discourse in a vertical, authoritative way, limiting the development of knowledge and skills.

Additionally, findings of this study showed that there is a general discomfort, expressed not only by students who are both direct and passive victims of the continuous modifications in the curriculum, which does not even have a major impact on their educational process; but also by the teachers who see these changes as "coming from a different socio-educational reality", and who also feel victims of these "incomprehensible changes". for which they are neither ready nor prepared.

Studies on teachers' training noted that there is a need for more training and support to individuals involved in the teaching process (Hunt, 2004). In her study on causes and dimensions of educational exclusion of rural girls in the Andean areas of Peru, Ames (2005) found that although national training programs began in 1996 to educate teachers in new methods and active pedagogy, their impact has been very limited. In this study, teachers recognize the importance of training, particularly training that focuses on the rural students' and teachers' reality. It was also observed that the Ministry of Education's regional offices do poor work in assigning specialized teachers to rural schools. Thus, rural students are trapped not only with teachers not updated in their own subjects, but also with teachers who themselves are completely untaught in the subjects they are teaching.

The second theme, **rural society's socio-educational discourses**, and its sub-themes indicate that gender bias in schools lowers female educational aspirations, and so decreases their tendency to complete their educational cycle. The bias is apparent in school authority structures, in male/female teacher ratios, in gender-stereotyping textbooks, in teacher/student interactions, and in teachers' attitudes and expectations, all of which influence girls' outcomes (Chowdhury, 1993). In this study high school girls repeatedly mentioned that they did not feel supported by teachers either in class or in their plans for the future. The relationship between

teachers' low expectations and girls' view of their teachers creates a *cycle of distrust*¹ (Alvarado, 2006).

In spite of the diverse problems that students find in their school education, it is still the promise, particularly in rural regions, of overcoming underdevelopment, poverty and discrimination. This study showed that education is also highly valued by parents, who hold diverse views based upon varying educational backgrounds and personal views on what they see the current educational system as offering to their children. Interviews with my participants' mothers showed that most of them had had only few years of primary-school education, which greatly impacted their lives. They described their lack of education as the reason they had to stay all their lives working in the *chacras*². Even though these mothers were pressed to abandon their own schooling for family reasons, they see their daughters' graduation from high school as a tool that will enable them to avoid becoming the blind ones, as they call themselves, because of the illiteracy which denies them the chance to find a job in a city.

The classroom discourses observed in this study mirror and generate power, impelling us to reflect on how power is exerted in terms of language; who has access to the various types of discourse; and who can and cannot talk to whom, in which situations, and about what (Wodak, 1995). Further, students' identities and gender roles are daily constructed with very strong messages about who has the power to speak up, and who is supposed to remain silent. These messages, as the findings showed, go beyond the educational setting, and involve household and community.

In the third theme, **issues of voice, agency, and empowerment**, one of the patterns observed was the desire of these girls to "become different" so as not to perpetuate their mothers' or sisters' fates. They considered education the best way to achieve a different future, since their mothers were limited in work opportunities because they lacked "*reading and writing power*". Even though the working conditions in the city are harsh and even exploitative, as the study described, participants are willing to experience them in the search for an opportunity their mothers and older sisters did not have. Interviews with participants showed their firm determination to break the poverty cycle. Furthermore, parents do not push them to remain in the fields as their parents did, because they recognize that the lands are not the abounding resources they once were.

Findings also showed the creation of a *community of experiences* by these young women, though not through the formal education process itself. This *community of experiences* is established mostly at school, but during break times or teachers' absences. It was found that neither created by the school nor in the educational

¹ Observations found that this *cycle of distrust* diminished the images of one group in the eyes of another (teachers and students).

² *Chacras* are the parcels of land where agricultural practices are generally performed manually, requiring the participation of the whole family.

process itself is there a formal space where female students can speak up and share their experiences. Since there was no formal space for such an activity, in order to have a quiet space without interruptions, set apart for the focus-group interviews it was important to meet in a different setting. Later, these meetings, which were initially planned for the purposes of the focus groups, became a space for discussion and friendly interaction, where girls had an open platform for sharing their views.

The mutual support and interactions in the focus-groups discussions led to acts of resistance within the school setting. Findings in this study showed that the participants' initial resistance was individual, but later became collective because it was through their *socialization network* at school that these young women influenced each other to plan for their futures as well as to react against the incompetent and unqualified teaching practices they found at school. An oppositional resistance was also in play among these participants, both against perpetuating their futures in the *chacras* as well as against teaching practices at school. It was also observed that by acting against perpetuating their lives in the *chacras*, these girls resisted not only working there, but also resisted limiting their life expectations and "*suffering for so little*," as their mothers did before them.

VII. Conclusions and recommendations

This study showed that in spite of numerous sociocultural, financial, and educational challenges, participants had a resolute determination to break the oppressive and abusive patterns that marked the lives of their mothers and female relatives, and instead, become active agents in the search for a different fate. Formal education, despite its tremendous lacks and failures, is seen as an crucial element in the fulfilling of these students' life purposes.

How these participants' agencies and voices developed and were recognized (or unrecognized) both inside and outside the educational setting is an important finding in the present study. Furthermore, findings suggest that the creation of empowerment spaces and the urgent intervention of local, regional, and national governmental agencies is integral to support students as they develop and achieve their full potential as active members of the society.

The implications of the study indicated that there is an urgent need for: the application of a curriculum that goes beyond urban contexts, and adapts to the sociocultural and educational reality of rural areas so as to meet rural students' needs; well-trained teachers able to apply gender-sensitive educational practices, which include the voices of female students; appropriate learning materials for non-Quechua-speaking rural students; creation, inside and outside the school, of empowerment spaces in which female students can both use their voices and receive preparation to enter the urban world. This study's participants were willing to make radical changes in their lives through hard work and commitment; it is therefore important to recognize that their participation in the labor market is

beneficial to the national economy. However, there are still important gender gaps which need to be addressed, both in terms of salary and access to the market. Thus, it is critically important to create for poor rural women who enter the job market, national labor policies to reduce the obstacles. Such policies should include those that would regulate working conditions in the cities, so as to deter cases of exploitation and violence.

In order to promote radical changes in the rural education, and to facilitate rural students' fair inclusion in the labor market, it is critical to have a concerted, collective effort by the central, regional, and local educational government offices, the educational system and its agents, non-governmental organizations, local business, and families and communities.

Finally, future research should explore the impact of *spaces for voices and participation* in which members of the school community bring their concerns and suggestions to the entire group. The study should analyze the challenges faced by women in these spaces, including how women are affected by social gender constructions and to what extent their voices are heard (or ignored). Future research should also follow female students as they journey to the cities to pursue work. Such studies should examine how they exercise their agency by preparing to go to the cities, leaving their households, and how they confront numerous obstacles in a hostile, unfamiliar environment.

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