



Unequal inclusion: Experiences and meanings of school segmentation in Mexico



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 May 2015

Received in revised form 1 September 2015

Accepted 29 September 2015

Keywords:

Inequality

Social class

Social and cultural reproduction

Latin America

School segmentation

ABSTRACT

Inequality seems to be endemic in Mexico. After a decade of moderate economic growth and improvements in some social indicators, inequality remains extremely high. In a context of contradictory trends, a new model of 'unequal inclusion' is emerging. Access to education in Mexico has increased in the last decades, but, simultaneously, education has experienced a deep segmentation between private schools for privileged students and public schools for popular sectors. This segmentation affects students' performance, but it has also consequences on the socialization and subjectivization processes. The analysis focuses on this underestimated effect of school segmentation examining the experiences and meanings of education among students from upper and lower social classes. Data come from qualitative fieldwork, interviews and focus groups with rich and poor students in Mexico City.

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1. Introduction

Social inequality is an endemic problem in Mexico as well as in most Latin American countries. During the second half of the twenty century the region experienced several political and economic crisis, but in the long term improvements in social wellbeing were reached: life expectancy grew, infant and maternal mortality decreased, basic education was expanded, and other social rights were extended among middle social classes (CEPAL, 2007). After two decades (1980s and 1990s) of deep neoliberal policies that increased vulnerability and social exclusion, the starting years of the 21st century brought a new boost in social development: positive trends are observed in health coverage, poverty reduction, expansion of education, levels of employment, and growth of middle classes. But, in spite of recent good news, Latin America still has the highest level of social inequality in the world (ECLA, 2010). Mexico is a paradigmatic case: almost half of its population lives in poverty (48.5%), the Gini Index of income inequality is 0.48, well above the OECD average of 0.33, and the average income of the richest 10% of the population is 27 times higher than that of the poorest 10% (the average ratio in OECD countries is 9 to 1) (OECD, 2011).

The paradox of social improvements and persistent inequality is particularly evident in the field of education. In Mexico between 1990 and 2010, basic education coverage became almost universal,

and the average years of schooling of young people, aged 25–29, increased from 7.9 to 10.2 (Population Census, 1990 and 2010). In addition, several constitutional reforms extended compulsory education; most recently, in 2011, making it compulsory until grade 12. But education has also experienced a deep segmentation, mainly by class and ethnicity.

In recent years, the Economic Commission for Latin America and several independent studies highlighted this new process of school segmentation and its potential consequences in terms of new forms of educational inequality (CEPAL, 2007; ECLA, 2010; Pereyra, 2009; Tiramonti, 2004; Freitas Resende et al., 2011; García Villegas and Quiroz López, 2011). Most of these studies analyze the segregation of poor and upper middle class students in public and private schools with deep contrast in pedagogical strategies and resources, educational infrastructure, pupils' performance, or educational achievement in international tests like PISA.

The consequences of this new type of school segmentation, however, exceed educational inequality. School is much more than a social institution of learning and knowledge transmission between generations; it is also a key institutional space of formal and informal socialization and subjectivization. Social practices and norms, perceptions and expectations, meanings and cultural repertoires are produced and reproduced in the social world of school. In this sense, school segmentation by social class has a critical societal effect: it contributes to a progressive distancing and socio-cultural isolation of social classes, a process I name social fragmentation.

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The purpose of this article is to explore this segmentation between privileged and popular urban students in contemporary Mexico. The analysis moves beyond objective (and quantitative) aspects of school segmentation such as infrastructure, human resources, or educational attainment. It focuses on some sociocultural dimensions of this process, exploring two specific aspects: the segmentation of “experiences” and “meanings” of education. I think this exploratory study could be a significant contribution to understand the social consequences of a school divide based on class inequality, and at the same time be important to design a new wave of policies for a real inclusion and a more cohesive society.

2. Methodology

This article is based on results from an extensive research with university students from lower and upper middle social classes. The project was carried out between 2009 and 2013 in four different universities: two public schools located in the eastern outskirts of Mexico City and two private schools located in the northwest of the same city; it is worth to mention that these locations match with patterns of spatial segregation in Mexico City: the east side concentrates the poorest districts and the northwest the most exclusive residential areas (Aguilar and Mateos, 2011; Bayón and Saraví, 2013). Moreover, these universities are socially identified as popular and elite schools in the local social milieu, respectively. The private universities selected for this study are among the most expensive in Mexico, with tuition fees between 10,000 and 15,000 dollars per academic year (the average family income of the lowest 60% of the total population in the income distribution structure, is around 5800 dollars per year) and both belong to different Catholic Congregations. In contrast, both public universities are completely free and one of them was created recently by the local government of Mexico City with the explicit purpose of providing high education opportunities for the lower social classes. Location and class were the main reasons to select these two pair of universities in order to explore experiences and meanings in differentiated “circuits of schooling” (Ball et al., 1995).

Fieldwork involved observation in all four settings, two focus groups with both groups of students, and 27 individual in-depth interviews; in total 39 male and female students have been directly involved in this study. Table 1 contains an overview of the main characteristics of the 39 participants. This sample was theoretically constructed (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998) looking for young people from privileged and popular family background. I conducted personally all the interviews and focus groups. Participants were previously unknown by the researcher and were contacted through key informants from each university. All the interviews and focus groups were taped, transcribed, and analyzed with the N*Vivo software for qualitative research. This information was complemented with a brief questionnaire completed by each student with information about themselves and their families. Complementarily, as most young people from lower social classes leave the school early in life, I draw on some data from a previous research project (Saraví, 2009) with poor young people living in the same east side of the city but with much lower levels of education (most of them with incomplete high school).

The interviews were based on a semi-structured guide, with several open questions about the experiences and meanings of inequality in education (as well as in the sphere of consumption and the city) and the educational trajectory of participants. Both focus groups had a “low-moderator-involvement” and were organized around five different topics; every participant chose a card with a topic and moderated the discussion about it. Each card had an open question or a provocative statement regarding the same topics of the

Table 1

Basic socio-demographic characteristics of respondents.

Code	Name	University	Gender	Age	Social Class
A-01	Arturo	Elite	Male	20	Upper-Middle Class
A-01	Juliana	Elite	Female	22	Upper-Middle Class
A-02	Juan Luis	Elite	Male	26	Upper Class
A-02	Gerardo	Elite	Male	19	Upper Class
A-03	Andrés	Elite	Male	26	Upper-Middle Class
A-04	Alejandra	Elite	Female	21	Middle Class
A-05	Leo	Elite	Male	25	Upper-Middle Class
A-06	Camila	Elite	Female	23	Upper-Middle Class
A-07	Alejandra	Elite	Female	23	Upper Class
A-08	Fernando	Elite	Male	24	Upper-Middle Class
A-09	Andrea	Elite	Female	28	Middle Class
A-10	Sofia	Elite	Female	19	Upper Class
A-11	Esteban	Elite	Male	19	Upper-Middle Class
A-12	Martín	Elite	Male	20	Upper Class
A-13	Mariana	Elite	Female	23	Upper Class
GF-A-01	Renata	Elite	Female	19	Upper-Middle Class
GF-A-01	Gael	Elite	Male	20	Upper Class
GF-A-01	Pablo	Elite	Male	18	Upper Class
GF-A-01	Julián	Elite	Male	20	Upper-Middle Class
GF-A-01	Valentina	Elite	Female	21	Upper Class
E-B-01	Emiliano	Popular	Male	26	Lower-Middle Class
E-B-02	Jacqueline	Popular	Female	21	Middle Class
E-B-03	Ramón	Popular	Male	19	Lower-Middle Class
E-B-04	Sebastián	Popular	Male	26	Lower-Middle Class
E-B-05	Paola	Popular	Female	21	Lower Class
E-B-06	Marisol	Popular	Female	23	Lower-Middle Class
E-B-07	José Luis	Popular	Male	26	Middle Class
E-B-08	Rafael	Popular	Male	21	Lower-Middle Class
E-B-09	Braian	Popular	Male	21	Lower-Middle Class
E-B-10	Abril	Popular	Female	24	Lower Class
E-B-11	Luis	Popular	Male	22	Lower Class
E-B-12	Jennifer	Popular	Female	24	Middle Class
GF-B-01	Itzel	Popular	Female	20	Lower-Middle Class
GF-B-01	Carlos	Popular	Male	21	Lower-Middle Class
GF-B-01	Angel	Popular	Male	25	Lower Class
GF-B-01	Guadalupe	Popular	Female	20	Lower-Middle Class
GF-B-01	Melina	Popular	Female	25	Lower-Middle Class
GF-B-01	Daniela	Popular	Female	21	Lower-Middle Class
GF-B-01	Santiago	Popular	Male	21	Middle Class

Note: Social Class categories combine education and occupation of both parents.

interviews. The real names of the participants and universities were replaced in order to preserve their anonymity.

3. Literature review

The relationship between education and inequality is a classic debate in the fields of education and development studies. There are different perspectives about this relationship, some of them with opposite positions. Education can be seen either as a key factor of social development, economic wellbeing, and equal opportunity or as a core mechanism of reproduction of social inequality and stratification. In general terms, the former approach is the dominant perspective in the public opinion and the social policy arena.

As Dubet (2001) has pointed out, in societies based on individual principles like freedom, responsibility, and personal effort, inequality resulting from the rules of meritocracy is socially accepted and legitimated. The school itself is conceived as a meritocratic institution, but education also represents one of the most important assets to play the game of meritocracy. Both individuals and countries need human capital in order to compete and succeed in local and global markets. As Tarabini (2010: 204) has pointed out, “education has played a crucial role in the global agenda for development since the 1990s; international bodies, northern and southern governments and even non-governmental organizations agree on emphasizing the virtues of educational investment as a key strategy in the fight against poverty and

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