Practices of conformity and transgression in an out-of-school reading programme for 'at risk' children

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ABSTRACT

A large body of research has demonstrated that the plurilingualisms and pluriliteracies that children and youth bring to classrooms are often not those required for school success. This is even more so for students from underprivileged backgrounds, a demographic where children and youth with family backgrounds of immigration are over-represented. This article reports on ethnographic research at an after-school reading programme for primary school children considered to be at risk of school failure in the old town of Barcelona. Results suggest that the practices of pluriliteracy supported by the programme often conform with those inherent to the children's formal education; that is, with the very practices that have contributed to the children being placed in the programme to begin with. However, through the fine-grained analysis of child–volunteer interactions, certain practices that subtly transgress these norms are identified. It is in such practices that we see potential for educational transformation.

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1. Introduction

Educational institutions face the enormous challenge of preparing young people in the plurilingualisms and pluriliteracies needed for their globalised presents and futures. However, much research has demonstrated that the linguistic and cultural resources that young people bring to classrooms are often not those required for success in formal schooling. This is even more so for students from underprivileged backgrounds, a demographic often categorised institutionally to be at risk of school failure, in which children and youth with family backgrounds of immigration are overrepresented (Vallejo & Dooly, 2013). Thus, paradoxically, students who are 'pre-equipped' with diverse communicative repertoires that could be used to the benefit of their education, and of society, are often vulnerable to poor school results.

As Rujas Martínez-Novillo (2015) explains, 'school failure', and thus being 'at risk' of it, have become naturalised as categories of public and commonsensical discourse in Spain since the end of the 20th century. Targeted educational programmes and mechanisms have proliferated as the categories have become crystallised. Rujas Martínez-Novillo claims that the naturalisation of the categories is

the result of a process of "co-enunciation" (p. 2, our translation) and mobilisation on behalf of political institutions, the media, the educational community, etc., which have been inseparable from broader social and educational transformations in Spain. In general, students at risk of school failure are considered to be those who are not achieving minimum standards at school and will potentially drop out after compulsory education; i.e. they will be early school leavers. Spain has had some of the highest, if not the highest, levels of early school leaving in the EU over at the past several decades (Eurostat, 2016).

Defining some children and young people as being at risk of school failure has real consequences for them, and for the educational policies and initiatives addressed at supporting them, including the programme where our research is taking place. Most studies in the Spanish and Catalan context associate being at risk of school failure with a series of factors, including ethnicity, social class, cultural capital and gender (Fernández Enguita, Mena, & Riviere, 2010; Puelles, 2012). The danger, though, is that by having certain traits, children and young people are predestined to be considered at risk of school failure as they are not *expected* to achieve academically, rather than not *actually* achieving. The labelling of students can become arbitrary, fixed and non-representative of their educational potential (Ross & Leathwood, 2013; Rujas Martínez-Novillo, 2015).

In our own research, conducted in an after-school reading programme for primary school children in Barcelona, the category of being at risk of school failure is one that we believe neither

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reflects nor validates the types of competences that the children we are working with display. From our own viewpoint, there is more risk in not adapting educational systems to include children and young people's repertoires as resources for learning, and in not helping maintain and develop those repertoires further, considering the globalised world in which we are living. However, as this is a category that is used in political and educational discourse in the context we work in, and one that is relevant to understanding the origin of the programme we study and the selection of its participants, it needs to be critically confronted.

The latest programme for international student assessment (PISA) results for reading comprehension from 2012 for Catalonia, and the educational inequalities that they highlight, help understand the context in which programmes such as the one where our research is being conducted have been created. We believe, as has indeed been highlighted by different experts (e.g. Prais, 2003), that the logic, methodology, and policy applications of PISA are problematic in many ways, and contribute to the naturalisation of the categories that we question; yet the results do help to introduce the context of our research. PISA is an assessment system applied triennially in countries across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that measures educational outcomes globally based on 15-year-old students' abilities in reading comprehension in their schools' main language of instruction (Catalan in the case of Catalonia), in mathematics, and in science literacy. Although the overall results from 2012 (the most recent available) for reading comprehension in Catalonia are above Spanish, EU and OECD averages (and they are better than for math and science), the breakdown of those results provides reason for concern (for an extended discussion see Bonal, Castejón, Zancajo, & Castel, 2015; Rincón Bonet, 2012):

- Socioeconomic status is a main factor determining differences in results, with students of lower socioeconomic status performing below their peers.
- Globally, autochthonous students who speak mainly Catalan at home perform better than students who speak mainly Spanish (a co-official and the majority language in Catalonia) at home, but this difference is minimal once socioeconomic status is accounted for.
- Students of immigrant background obtain worse results, even once socioeconomic status has been accounted for. In Catalonia, these differences are much higher than the average for OECD countries.
- Schools with high concentrations of children of immigrant background have lower results.

Reports such as these have caused certain alarm in Catalonia and have led to different initiatives aiming to pre-empt low attainment by targeting collectives of students considered to be at risk of school failure. These are mainly programmes targeting students of immigrant background in public schools with high linguistic and cultural diversity. Furthermore, perpetual strains on public schools mean that academic support is often left in the hands of other bodies, including public libraries and non-profit community organisations, such as the volunteer-based programme in which we are conducting our research. Public spending on education in Catalonia as a proportion of GDP has long been lower than both the Spanish and the EU averages.[1] Furthermore, the financial crisis in Spain since 2008 means that public spending on education per capita is continually decreasing as the school population is increasing. In Catalonia this has meant increased class sizes, fewer teachers in schools and

poorer working conditions, as well as lower coverage of financial assistance for families and students in need, within in a broader context of increasing poverty. All of this helps contextualise the increasing demand for free out-of-school academic support programmes targeting students considered at risk of school failure in general, and reading programmes specifically. It also helps value the critical contribution of such programmes towards more equitable educational outcomes.

An informative body of research on out-of-school literacy programmes has shown how they contribute to an understanding of the educational experiences of children and youth and may help guide educational policy-making, school practices and teacher development programmes. Some of the research from beyond Catalonia and Spain has shown how such programmes have the potential to re-order power imbalances inherent to classrooms (Cole, 1996; Cole & The Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006), with external pressures on learners being lower and the adult agenda being more modest (Spielberger & Halpern, 2002). Some research has linked positive programme outcomes to intervention in early primary school years, with programmes involving older learners being considered less effective and more costly (Cobb, 2000). Other research has explored aspects such as tutorial session structure and types of adult tutors; less systematic programmes with minimally trained tutors often yield poorer results, especially with socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Allor & McCathren, 2004). Research in community-based educational programmes has described the importance of the relational and identitary aspects supported by them, that are often missing in formal schooling for minority children and youth, while also calling for more collaboration with schools (Lee & Hawkins, 2008). Several studies linked to the *Fifth Dimension* project (Cole, 1996; Cole & The Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006), and the related *La Clase Mágica* project (Macías & Vázquez, 2015; Vázquez, 2003), which promote diversity and digital technologies, have shown how collaborative interactional contexts, in which languages and modalities are mixed as a norm, are beneficial to learning.

In the Spanish and Catalan contexts, some interesting programmes with children and youth have been implemented and studied. Among these, the *Casa de Shere Rom* project (Crespo, Lalueza, Portell, & Sanchez Busqués, 2005; Crespo, Pallí, Lalueza, & Luque, 1999) was inspired by the *Fifth Dimension* project and consisted of a learning community involving university based researchers and Roma educators, children and adolescents on the periphery of Barcelona. It aimed to favour the educational integration of the participating students, and in particular, the development of digital literacies. The collaborative, micro-culture developed in the programme generated new intercultural teaching and learning relationships. Subero, Vujasinovic, and Esteban-Guitart (2017) comment on a variety of projects in Catalonia and abroad that have sought to incorporate the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992), and what they describe as funds of identity, of students into educational practice, linking up formal educational spaces with families and communities.

A key contribution of all of this research has been to highlight the educational benefits of after-school programmes that, quite simply, position learners as competent. This is highly significant in the programme we study, taking into account that students attending have very often been selected based on supposed deficiencies; that is, for failing to meet expected minimum standards. However, despite the promise of after-school literacy programmes, oftentimes the same dominant practices of schools – that is, the same practices that place certain students into support programmes – are those reinforced by them (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Given the increasing demand in Catalonia for programmes targeting students considered at risk of school failure, we believe that more research is still needed both to

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[1] In Spain, educational funding and policy is primarily managed at the regional level.