

What does education mean for us and how do we get involved? Parents' accounts in a Mexican rural community

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This research focuses on parental involvement in their children's education in a Mexican rural community. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction, the key concepts under investigation were field, habitus, social, cultural and symbolic capital. From an ethnographic perspective, data were collected through a variety of research methods in the autumn of 2005. I managed to interact closely with participants in order to investigate their attitudes, knowledge and practices with respect to the formal and informal education in their own and their children's lives. The values they transmitted to their children were also important objects of study. Investigating parents' background and their interaction with the community school was crucial in order to understand their constraints in getting involved in their children's education. The paper analyses parents' satisfaction with the provision of formal education in their community and, families' limitations in getting involved. It also illustrates that parental involvement was regarded mainly as a mothers' task. The relevance of this study relies on the attempt to test Bourdieu's theory in an area that has been generally under-explored as is the case of parental involvement in rural settings.

Introduction

My PhD sought to understand the way in which parents get involved in their children's education. This included schooling experiences and informal learnings out of school. The study took place in a small rural community in southwest Mexico and the main research question was *in what ways do the cultural and social resources of parents enhance or inhibit their involvement in their children's education?*

Bourdieu's *theory of social and cultural reproduction* underpinned the investigation in order to analyse the transmission of capitals from parents to children; the agency of parents in getting involved in their children's education and the social and institutional structures that help parents to get involved in their children's education.

I managed to interact closely with eight families in order to investigate their attitudes, knowledge and

practices with respect to their formal and informal education and the transmission of *educative values* within the families.

In addition, other issues such as parents' educational background, any further educative expectations they might have for their children, and the factors that helped or restricted them to get involved were also studied. Testimonies of teachers and local authority officials were taken into account in order to analyse parents' relationship with the community school and study the extent to which members of the educational system encouraged parents to get involved.

From an ethnographic perspective, a variety of research methods were employed (observation, focus groups, photo-interviewing, unstructured questionnaires, interviews and document analysis). Data were collected over three months and the fieldwork was divided in stages in order to build a gradual rapport with participants. The paper is structured in three sections: the first one briefly outlines the application of Bourdieu's concepts into this research. The second one introduces a general

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overview of the context of study: the community where the fieldwork was undertaken and the organization of rural education in Mexico. The last section shares the findings related to parents' understandings of education, mothers' responsibility of involvement and parents' general constraints in getting involved.

Bourdieu's thinking tools

Bourdieu's concepts of social, cultural and symbolic capital, field and habitus constitute a theoretical system from which I got a useful insight in order to analyse parental involvement in education and the role played by the wider social context in this endeavour. By drawing on his work I attempt to explain how families' resources and activities exert an influence upon the educational trajectories of their children. In this section I outline my own interpretation of Bourdieu's key concepts whereas his theory of social and cultural reproduction will be analysed in the final conclusions.

Different notions of capital

According to Bourdieu (1989) individuals are distributed in society depending on the volume and structure of the capital they possess (including economic capital) and each capital can be convertible, under certain conditions, into other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Cultural capital, (Bourdieu, 1986) can be found in three different ways. First, in the embodied state, this is the incorporation, inculcation and assimilation of long-lasting dispositions in the mind and body. I interpret it as any endeavour aimed to improve our physical and intellectual self-being, both in the form of knowledge and skills. Second, in the objectified state, this is the material and cultural goods appropriated materially and symbolically. Third, in the institutionalized state, which are the academic qualifications provided by schools (certificates, diplomas, degrees).

Cultural capital in its institutionalized state is important because as Bourdieu (1977) says, the appropriation of culture is crowned by academic qualifications. Moreover "the inheritance of cultural wealth only really belongs (although it is theoretically offered to everyone) to those endowed with the means of appropriating it for themselves" (Bourdieu, 1977: 488).

Social capital refers to all relations of solidarity, support and recognition within social groups and the creation of social networks and exchanges among its members. Symbolic capital is the form that the various species of capital (economic, cultural, and social) assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate. It implies the acknowledgment of forms of capital

and confers power to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose (Bourdieu, 1989).

My personal standpoint is that all social groups produce and reproduce cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Furthermore, all families regardless of their class have particular ways of transmission of specific kinds of capital, though through different means and for different purposes. Consequently, it is important to have a comprehensive and inclusive idea of what culture means for diverse social groups. In the case of Mexico, rural communities have a highly varied cultural capital that sharply differs from affluent urban sectors. Therefore Bourdieu's concepts of capital could be found in deprived communities though they have a different significance, proportions and fulfil different purposes. For example, participants' cultural capital was subtler to find in an institutionalized state inasmuch as their possession of academic qualifications was rather poor. However, it was embedded in both the meaning that dwellers assigned to some of their material goods (land in particular) and their leisure and cultural festivities. Therefore, dwellers' cultural capital was especially embodied since women and men employed more physical than academic skills in order to perform gendered differentiated occupations.

Field

A field is a network or a configuration of objective relations that follow specific logics (economic, religious, academic, political, artistic, etc.). However, "a field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules that are not explicit and codified" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 98). Furthermore, the boundaries of the field can only be determined by empirical investigation. For the purpose of this research, the field was comprised by the educational domain within the community (both at formal and informal educational settings) being the rural school the institutionalized aspect of it. By educational domain I understand participants' educational experiences, parents' child rearing ideas, the knowledge and skills passed to their children, and in general, the value that parents' give to their children's education.

Habitus

Habitus is the organizing principle of agents' actions. It is a disposition inscribed in the body schema and in the schemes of thought laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing. These dispositions are durable and transposable and, therefore become the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience. The notions of habitus and field are highly interconnected. It is a twofold relation where, on

one side, the field structures the habitus and, on the other one, habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world in which is worth investing one's energy (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For the purposes of this research, parents of school-age children and teenagers were the agents I focused on in order to analyse their habitus, social, cultural and symbolic capital and understand the role of these concepts in the way they get involved in their children's education. Through the study of parents' habitus I analysed how their decisions and strategies helped them to get involved in their children's education and, eventually, follow determinant paths in their lives.

The context

The community and its dwellers

The study took place in a community of twenty-two rural families called El Trajin located in southwest Mexico in the state of Michoacan. According to the National Institute of Statistics this state has a high level of marginalization; 31.56% of households are reported in extreme poverty and the average level of education of the population over 15 years is of 6.4 years. The state has a significant presence of bilingual speakers (Spanish plus two different indigenous languages according to the region).

El Trajin overall was rather small. Consisting of only 23 houses, a basketball court and the school, it had no paved roads to access it and there was neither public electricity nor drainage. Houses were usually built on stages according to the economic possibilities of villagers. All participants spoke only Spanish and adults' average level of education was primary school completed. Families had an average of four children. The majority of participants in the community had a rural background, this means that they came from generations that have earned their living from agriculture and have done it ever since. Close kinship relationships existed within the community, which made their interactions tighter and often under the leadership of the households heads (usually old people).

In terms of ethnicity all participants were mestizos that is a mix of Spanish and Mesoamerican heritage. In Mexico mestizos have been allocated a subordinate position within the social stratification imposed since the Spanish colony. Bonfil (1987) understands the mixed-races phenomenon (mestizaje) more as a historical process of oppression that has managed to change the original Indian social organization. According to him, mestizos comprise the contingent of Indians that have had to give up their own identity and culture, though many Indian cultural characteristics are still alive within the mestizo population. The life-style of a traditional rural

mestizo community is very similar to an Indian in their housing, nourishment, maize-based agriculture, and health. Although, most Mexican rural communities are not considered Indians and its dwellers do not claim to be so and this was the case in El Trajin.

Due to difficulties of making a living from agriculture and marriages with outsiders, some participants did not have a pure rural background and many had occupations not necessarily related to agriculture. High unemployment rates, the lack of basic services and bad paid jobs in the region encouraged men to immigrate illegally to the US as cheap labour force, particularly in construction and agricultural activities. Absolutely all men in the community have emigrated at least once in their lives. The massive emigration has become a tradition across the state and it was strongly encouraged by friends and relatives constituting part of their collective habitus (Nash, 1990).

Rural Education in Mexico

An analysis of the provision of the formal education in the village was important as it framed much of the school and community life. The information of this section is mainly a result of document policy analysis.

Rural education in Mexico is organized by two different public institutions. The Public Ministry of Education (SEP) runs rural schools in communities with over 500 inhabitants (throughout this paper these schools are called mainstream schools).

Schools in smaller and isolated communities are run by the National Council for Education Development (CONAFE) which is a governmental decentralized organization that applies different aid programs aimed to assist highly deprived groups around the country (indigenous, rural, and urban).

While acknowledging the cultural and socio-economic diversity of the rural population, CONAFE designs, develops and applies, with the support of specialists, the Community Courses program and establishes schools where the children live, thus avoiding them having to travel long distances to attend school. This study focused on CONAFE Community Courses inasmuch as the school in El Trajin worked under this program and played an important role in the life of the community.

The Community Courses program is a small subsystem within CONAFE that provides basic education for children aged between three and fourteen. It was designed as a differentiated pedagogic model, which adapts to the needs of the different rural communities and is organized with the support of teachers and villagers nationwide. Its aim is to make use of the heterogeneity of capabilities and knowledge

existing among the children. CONAFE schools are called 'unitarian' because they have one tutor teaching in a multi-grade classroom (children from different ages and different levels of progress learning together in the same space). However, in exceptional cases, schools may have two teachers if the community can afford their accommodation and food.

Teachers in CONAFE are called 'instructors'. They are between sixteen and twenty years old and most of them come from a similar background as the students. Their average level of education is secondary and, in few cases, college. They assume the function of teachers without having the full professional training. Applicants receive a two-months training before starting teaching. Apart from a monthly allowance, instructors receive from CONAFE a scholarship in order to continue studying for the next fifty months after accomplishing their service. The scholarship is a strong reason why many teenagers decide to join CONAFE, since most of them come from families that cannot afford their educational expenses (Ezpeleta, 1997). Instructors are trained only with respect to teaching methods though; in general, they have the willingness to take part in the integral development of the communities they serve (CONAFE, 1992).

Community Courses have the same contents as the official programs of SEP schools, though differently organized, giving importance to the local context. This does not mean having a 'rural curriculum' because, according to CONAFE, the significant knowledge and interests of rural children are not limited to their immediate environment since they may be interested in what happens in other places. Children aged three to five attend pre-school and students aged six to eleven are gathered in the same classroom and divided in three different levels: level I (equivalent to 1st and 2nd grades of mainstream primaries); level II (3rd and 4th grades) and level III (5th and 6th grades). The children stay around two years at each level.

Findings

What do parents think of education

Participants often referred to education as something beneficial for them. There was a general idea that through education they could better themselves and open-up their minds. Therefore parents allocated a positive value to education and thus it was something welcomed in their lives. Nevertheless, I found a mismatch between the value of education and the meaning participants allocated to it. For the majority, education meant basically acquiring literacy and

numeracy; abilities that provided them with the possibility to 'experience and interact in the world'.

If we cannot read, we don't know anything. We can get lost if we can't read the numbers and roads. I've always said that those who knows 'a letter' knows a lot and is not 'blind' [second stage; sixth focus group; Eugenia]

However, it was more important for participants the hope that through education they could 'earn a living' and thus overcome deprivation. Although parents had limited economical and educational resources, they wanted their children to keep studying and learn more because they believed that through education they would have a better life than previous generations.

Education is important. We used to be poorer; we would like to give more to our children [second stage; fifth focus group; Magnolia]

Parents had their own ways of supporting their children's academic work. According to the Community Course instructor, parents write down words in their children's notebooks in order for them to read them aloud or dictate words to them so the children can write them down. She said that even with scarce material parents managed to do good things and that sometimes even the children taught maths to their parents.

Parents' interest in their children's basic education was due, to a large extent, to the fact that dwellers preferred their offspring to move away from their usual tough occupations. Cragnolino (2004) found that rural families encouraged their children's education as a consequence of structural transformations on their former truly rural environment and I found a similar phenomenon among participants.

We work a lot; physically it's a hard job and I don't want them to work with the body. I want my son to study and be different than us because our life is very tough; I think it's very different and better to work with the brain; I want him to keep studying, I don't how I will manage but I'll pay for his studies [third stage; interview; Rufino 16/12/05]

Mothers do the work

Though fathers were generally interested in their children's upbringing, parental involvement in their children's formal education was basically a duty of mothers. Mothers had to deal with these responsibilities not only because they were more available but mainly because of the gender roles imposed in the community. This confirms Borg & Mayo (2001); Hanafin & Lynch (2002); Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997); and Vincent's (2000) findings that parental involvement in education is a gendered task. Reay's (1998) statement of mothers as agents of class reproduction is well represented in the quotations below:

My husband helps them and plays with them; but men can always go away regardless if they're employed or not; they want to distract themselves from being all the time in the community whereas we can't do that and always have to be with the children [second stage; fifth focus group; Magnolia]

It's the mother; we go to work and she is in charge of the homework; just when I arrive home I asked them about their homework [second stage; seventh focus group; Manolo]

Parents' perceptions of CONAFE

Interestingly, parents (especially mothers) did not always sympathize with CONAFE as its system was much more relaxed than mainstream schools. According to the mothers, instructors in CONAFE tended not to establish hierarchical positions among them and the students, who were welcomed to express their opinions freely and continuously thought they were right. For mothers, this represented a problem when the children moved to mainstream schools where teachers did not allow such familiarity. Besides, at CONAFE School children's personal appearance was less important as they were not checked having clean shoes and uniform or taking all the needed material; whereas at mainstream schools, children could not even attend if they were untidy. Moreover, the fact that CONAFE School did not have a head teacher and that the instructors were too young, not qualified and constantly moving made mothers critical of it and aware of the differences with respect to mainstream schools. Consequently, five school-aged children in the community were enrolled in the nearest mainstream rural primary school because parents thought that in this way their children would be

more responsible. Nevertheless parents did not take into account whether the shift from CONAFE to more traditional mainstream schools affected their children. Parents thought that the stricter the school then better the quality of education received by their children. In Bourdieu's words, only 'mainstream schools' can transmit the 'legitimate' cultural capital. These discrepancies, however, did not impede that the instructors were always respected and socially acknowledged for tutoring the children.

The limits of involvement

Though generally welcomed, education was not considered a panacea. Participants knew that education was not a guarantee to finding a job. There were disappointing cases of studied relatives that could not find a job and ended-up doing something else. This situation scared not only parents but also teenagers and made them think twice about spending their time and scarce money in schooling.

Even having taken the decision to invest in schooling, education always meant a sacrifice. Parents had to work out how to afford their children's education as money was a constant limitation. Students attending mainstream schools needed uniform and, in general, children needed some money to spend at school and these expenses represented a limitation for parents. Consequently, parental choice regarding their children's education often involved some kind of discrimination. The most generalized was against the investment in the education of girls.

We managed to send our daughter to secondary but for her college my husband said: 'she will find a guy and will go; she better stay in here' [second stage; seventh focus group; Eugenia]

This bias, which I called sibling inequality, was absolutely discouraged by mothers but they had little power over the men's common opinion that spending on their daughters' schooling was a waste of time and money.

When my husband Manolo says he will support our son Mauro's education and not to our daughter Pamela he is already valuing more the boy [second stage; seventh focus group; Magnolia]

I found that fathers considered it pointless to invest in their daughters' education after primary school mainly because of early marriages and high unemployment rates.

*I think both are equally capable
but my husband doesn't think like
that*

[second stage; seventh focus
group; Justa]

Due to the general emphasis on acquiring just literacy and numeracy, parents' support and enthusiasm decreased once their children accomplished their basic education. This was worsened by the massive rates of emigration. Regardless of parents' efforts and counsels, teenagers were strongly appealed by emigration. Although emigration was supported by a vast social network, I found that parents, and especially mothers, emphasized the risks and difficulties that emigration entailed because they did not want their children to emigrate.

*The profession we just don't want
is the 'migrant profession'* [second
stage; sixth focus group; Justa]

However, when children were old enough to decide what to do with their lives, although parents did convey their desire for them to keep studying; they definitely did not enforce them to do so. There was a generalized idea that when teenagers do not want to keep studying there was nothing to do.

*If children want to take another
path we should support them,
otherwise, they'll be unhappy.
Every person will decide; I won't
oblige them* [second stage;
seventh focus group; Manolo]

Therefore parents' efforts had little effect over teenagers who even knowing that physical work was harder many chose it because of the economic independency it represented for them. At the end of the day, parents seemed to accept whatever their offspring decided without imposing what they should or should not do. It is important to stress, however, that low marks and school failure were not generalized reasons why participants opted for the labour market instead of continuing to study.

*It was more difficult to work
because at school I was one of the
best students. I was part of the
'civic honours'* [third stage;
interview; Rufino 16/12/05]

Consequently, I found a disparity in the parental relationships with both age groups. This corresponds with Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) statement suggesting that parents of

younger children get involved in order to improve and affirm positive performance, while parents of older children may get involved if adolescent performance is poor. With their younger children, participants were not only stricter but held higher educational expectations that, nevertheless, seemed to fade away when their children grew older.

*When they don't want to keep
studying there's nothing to do*
[second stage; seventh focus
group; Luciana]

Conclusions

My general interpretation of Bourdieu's arguments throughout his work is that the more privileged in society are capable of transmitting and legitimizing the dominant culture and thus maintaining their advantages in detriment of the deprived groups which do not count with the same resources and opportunities to acquire the legitimized cultural capital.

According to Bourdieu (2000) the school pedagogic action reproduces the dominant culture and thus contributes to the reproduction of the structure of power relations within a social formation. In other words, the school always tends to reproduce the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among groups or classes, thereby contributing to the reproduction of the social structure.

CONAFE, on the other hand, seek for educational equity in rural communities in order for the children to catch up and not be left out from the benefits that education supposedly will bring to their lives; its schools are not part of the mainstream system and operate through a non-traditional approach.

At CONAFE School in El Trajin instructors, children and parents had quite homogeneous life-trajectories. Students in multi-grade classrooms were not really competing among themselves and did not strive to decode the instructors' messages because instructors and students socio-economic background was akin. This does not mean that struggles within the field (the educational domain) did not exist but, at the classroom level in this particular school, the inequalities were less unfair, which made the students' schooling experiences less disturbing. Consequently, the dominant equalitarian structure in El Trajin was transmitted and reinforced both at the family and the community school levels.

However, the real distress came later when children had to move to mainstream schools either because their parents did not share CONAFE principles or because the students had to attend secondary or college education which was

not provided in their community. Regardless of parents' desire for their children to acquire a richer cultural capital through schooling, this did not always work as planned. Firstly, CONAFE instructors possessed and transmitted similar values from those of their students. Secondly, even when students attended mainstream rural schools, they generally did not continue to the educational sector beyond their secondary education because of the generalized disruption of schooling promoted mainly by emigration.

CONAFE model has been regarded as interesting and successful over the years (Fuenlabrada & Taboada, 1992) and I consider that its biggest achievement lies in the fewer value-clashes at the classroom level among instructors and students, which decreased poor learning usually associated with the education in rural communities. Nonetheless, CONAFE fails at not having a situated curriculum designed specially to address the immediate necessities and interests of the rural children.

It is crucial that the school curriculum fits the local necessities especially in marginalized

contexts where the disruption of education is promoted by the adverse social and economical realities. By implementing local knowledge and skills into the curriculum parents could participate more directly in their children's education and more importantly CONAFE would contribute to the reinforcement of local activities as a way to discourage external forces (like emigration) among the young population.

This paper illustrates what happens in a specific Mexican rural community where CONAFE endeavors are not carried out beyond primary education and where parents despite of welcoming education into their children's lives can actually do very little to overcome their own limitations. As a result, emigration step into the vacuum, as it seems to be an escape and the socially constructed solution for teenagers and dwellers in general inasmuch as the boarder society is unable to integrate rural people into efficient local and national projects other than expulsing them as cheap labour force.

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