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Revising Bourdieu: Social reproduction in light of alternative educational systems

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Background

This paper draws upon doctoral research that sought to understand how financially disadvantaged families in a Mexican rural community become involved in education. The study analysed whether the community's social and institutional organisation helped or restricted parents to participate in their own, their children's and young people's formal and informal education.

The aim of the study was to understand the ways in which financially disadvantaged parents in rural Mexico get involved in their children's education. This included schooling experiences and informal learning outside school of girls and boys aged 3 to 16 years. The purpose was to analyse the transmission of material, social and cultural resources within the families and the way in which parents' backgrounds influenced their strategies of involvement and the educative expectations they had for their children. The study also examined whether a lack of adequate financial resources inhibited the children's educational participation and choices.

Rural education in Mexico is organised by a decentralised governmental organisation that provides educative assistance to the inhabitants of small, remote and deprived localities that do not count with educative services of the Ministry of Education. This organisation designs, with the support of educational researchers, differentiated pedagogic models that adapt to the needs of different communities. The courses are organised with the support of teachers and villagers and the schools have one tutor teaching in a multi-grade classroom consisting of children from different ages and different levels of progress learning together in the same space.

Research Questions

The key research question of the study was: in what ways do the community's social and institutional organisations appear to help or hinder parental involvement in their children's education?

Other important research questions were:

- a) What are the physical, material, social and cultural resources in this Mexican rural community and in what ways do these resources influence participants?
- b) Could parental involvement in education be a vehicle for the transmission and reproduction of family resources, values, and attitudes to the children?
- c) Do parents' limited educational backgrounds and material resources hinder their effective involvement in their children's education?
- d) What, if any, are the discrepancies between the practices and expectations of the families and those of their community school?

Methods

The literature analysed was on areas of parental involvement and rural education.

Because the research questions of the study sought to analyse the social dynamics and their impact on the way parents involved in their children's education, an ethnographic approach to enquiry was

employed. The main research methods were observations, focus groups, photographs and unstructured interviews. Three complementary research methods were also used such as document policy analysis; a household surveys and open-ended questionnaires.

Frame

Since the interests of this study involve both social structures and individuals' actions, a theoretical explanation of the interrelationship between structure and agency seemed to be useful for the purposes of this research. Therefore, Bourdieu's Theory of Practice was employed as the theoretical framework. The paper reflects upon the convenience of using Bourdieu's thinking tools (cultural, social and symbolic capital, field and habitus) during the first stages of research design. However, it critically analyses whether these tools needed to be re-worked considering the particular context of study as well as the suitability of the theory to explain reproduction processes within alternative educational systems.

Research findings

Since the provision of formal education in the research setting differed from mainstream educational systems, the findings of this research provided interesting analytical elements to assess Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction in light of alternative educational systems. Therefore, the findings reported in this paper are examined in terms of their theoretical implications. First, Bourdieu's thinking tools of cultural, social and symbolic capital were helpful explanatory concepts for the investigation of the community's social structure. Second, the concept of field in this research was useful in order to understand the characteristics and limitations of both formal and informal education. Third, the concept of habitus was useful in order to analyse participants' expectations, choices and life-trajectories. However, regarding Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction, some divergences were found with respect to the alternative educational system operating in the community.