Full Length Research Paper

Challenging segregational practices in a Spanish secondary school: Results from an ethnographic research

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This article presents partial results of a multi-sited ethnographic study about the role of multiple literacies in young people's learning in and outside school. In one of the five participant secondary schools, fourth grade students were segregated in groups according to their special needs. We start with a critical review on segregated and inclusive education. Subsequently, we describe our ethnographic research about learning practices in and outside secondary schools with students in their last year of compulsory education. The results present the relationships between students who were either "failing" or "being successful" in school as well as the institutional reaction to our inclusive experience.

Key words: Collaborative practices, ethnographic study, school segregation, young people.

INTRODUCTION

Our research group has been trying to respond to the Spanish secondary education situation in which 30% of the students, mainly boys, leave school before taking their accreditation. In a previous review on school failure and early school leaving (Hernández and Tort, 2009), the dominant approach that emerged offered a negative view of those who do not follow the secondary school rules and expectations. Such perspective is founded on the theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970) and a deficit view towards the students (McMahon

and Portelli, 2004). The later basically explains school failure through the student's lack of sociological or psychological conditions that would assure a successful academic career. Variables such as family structure, parents' studies, working conditions, class stratification, cultural background (e.g. being immigrants) and, in general, the lack of cultural capital emerge as determinants of school failure and dropout. Since previous researches (Hernández, 2011a), we adopted another perspective that considers the young people's relationship

with savoir[1] (Charlot, 1997, 2001). Instead of searching for sociological or psychological variables that could explain why the dropout students do not meet the school requirements, we have been paying attention to the experiences of the students (Fielding, 2001, 2004, Hadfield and Haw, 2007), their relationships, inter-pretations of the world and their activities and interests not only in school but also beyond (Patel Stevens, 2005). For instance, an English teacher may describe a young boy as a complete failure while the same boy keeps a very popular blog on English poetry. Likewise, a girl may show very little motivation during her music classes in school while outside school she plays in a band and loves music.

In the narratives built by the young participants of our previous researches (Hernández, 2011a, b), we realised the importance of what is learned outside school and thought about the possible differences and boundaries between learning in and outside school. Another factor that emerged in our previous researches was the role of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the young people's lives, which brought up reflections on the new literacies that are developed by them. In order to investigate about the young people's learning in and outside school and the new literacies developed by them, we decided to carry on a multi-sited ethnographical study in 5 secondary schools. However, learning from previous researches about young people's experiences (Hernández and Padilla-Petry, 2011) and following a participative approach (Hadfield and Haw, 2007, Fielding, 2004), we decided to do research with young people rather than about young people. Because of this new approach, the young participants of our research would try to do their ethnographic research themselves. Thus, we had two types of ethnographic research: the one that the young participants tried to do with our help and our research. Actually, both of them were deeply interwoven and could not be separated since all of us were participants and researchers. Moreover, our roles as university researchers in the field were not limited to the research with the young participants because we also had to train them to carry on an ethnographic research. The five Catalan secondary schools that participated in our multi-sited ethnographic research had their differences and similarities. Four of them were public schools, one was a private school, four of them were urban schools in or within 15 kilometres from Barcelona and the other one was a semi-rural school located within 200 kilometres from Barcelona.

The present paper is about one particular public centre whose students were separated in groups according to their special educational needs and previous grades. Although, our research was not about the difference between inclusive and special education, the particular reality of this centre called our attention since the youth that took part in our research came from two different groups: a special needs and a regular one. As the school's teachers told us, the special needs group was formed by a mix of youth who had psychopathological disorders diagnoses such as Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Conduct Disorder or Intellectual Disability and whose grades "lagged behind". As our research activities put the youth from both groups to work together, we ended up interfering somehow with the school's segregation routine and generating a different way of working with the youth.

Inclusive versus segregated education

The field of education policies has been facing children and young people that have trouble fitting in the educational system for quite a long time. Lately, these learners have been considered by experts and policy makers (UNESCO, 1994) as having "special educational needs", a well-known term since the Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978). Nowadays, under the special educational needs' umbrella, we may find many different conditions from psychopathological disorders to sensorial impairments, from learning disabilities to social exclusion etc. How to deal with these special needs has been changing along with society's awareness of and sensibility towards them (Vislie, 2003). Currently, inclusive education (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) is majorly accepted as the best way to both educate those students and change the society in a way that other social barriers may be removed and prejudices eradicated (Torres, 2000). In fact, in dealing with people of any age who have any kind of disability, one of the main goals is to assure their participation in society as much as possible (WHO, 2001). The authority of the inclusive discourse in some circles, like the university, may create a somewhat false impression that there are no reasons for defending a special education that separates those who have special educational needs from those who are considered as normal students because they fit in the system without requiring changes or adaptations. In fact, there are many reasons to segregate that allegedly defend the rights and the best interests of the special needs' group.

One of the main reasons is the homogeneity of the group as something that would help facilitate a highly specialised educational intervention. Since the teacher's intervention would be more focused on the common needs of a precise group, it would help them progress better. Within this reasoning, the similarities among learners would be a group's desirable trait and the differences an obstacle to a good education. Another reason for segregating is to protect students with special needs from the prejudices and negative attitudes of the

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[1]We deliberately use the French word *savoir* instead of knowledge to refer to a deeper, bodily, self-relationship with what someone knows.

"normal" kids. Nevertheless, one of the changes that gave rise to the overcoming of the special education as a segregation practice was the change of the educational model that considered the special educational needs as purely individual and independent from the others. Overcoming a medical and psychological view that usually considered individual deficiencies as a personal matter instead of interactions between personal and social conditions generated a change of paradigm clearly exposed in the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (WHO, 2001). For instance, instead of talking about a particular person's handicap, we would rather talk about how much society constrains this particular person's participation in groups or activities. Following this new approach, society would not only accept the task to help reduce and overcome barriers that generate exclusion but would also recognise its responsibility in the creation of the special needs, misfit, and labels on what is odd. Thus, it is not only a matter of having an inclusive education but also rethinking which social practices and structures help to produce strangeness and, in the case of education, the so-called educational special needs.

METHODS

In our multi-sited ethnographic research, two university researchers were assigned to each participant secondary school and each centre was asked to form a group of fourth grade young people with both students that met the school's learning expectations and students who did not. Each school followed different criteria to choose the youth that would participate in our research. The school this paper is about decided to pick two students from their special needs group (group A) and four from a regular group (group B). Group A's curriculum was an adaptation of the regular curriculum adopted in the other three groups (B, C and D) of students. Such adaptation basically implied fewer contents and more flexible evaluation goals. The group A was half the size of the other groups, which was repeatedly referred to by its teachers and students as a clear advantage over the other groups. Also, intentionally but not entirely successfully, the school tried to disguise the special needs group by giving it the first letter (A instead of D). Bringing them all together (students from groups A and B) in the group that would work with us made clear the differences between them as well as the educational precarity generated by the school's policy on special educational needs. So, although, studying these differences and the educational consequences of a segregational educational policy were not part of the goals of our research, doing that was almost inevitable due to the context of this particular school.

As mentioned before, one of the main aspects of this project was the realisation of an ethnographical investigation, not about young people but with young people. The 6 young participants were 15 to 16 years old and their school accepted the research carried on by them during our time together as their fourth-grade final research project. On the one hand, the teachers that were in charge of orienting and assessing the students' research projects took the school's decision of accepting the young participants' research as the project required by the curriculum. On the other hand, the students who participated in our project were offered and accepted the possibility of doing their research project about learning in and outside school guided by us (university teachers) instead of by their teachers. We spent 4 months in the field having approximately one weekly work session with the students during school time. The school this paper is about is a large public secondary centre situated in an industrial town 20 kilometres from Barcelona with a population of 26,000 people. At the end of our time together, the young participants presented their research both at the school and at the university. In the first session, we asked the young participants to imagine and create a graphic representation, showing their interests in and outside school. We justified our request by explaining that the members of our investigation team always began a research by first reflecting on our own thoughts and feelings about the research theme. We also explained that they could create their representations as they preferred: using images, photographs, drawing, writing etc. In the next session, we introduced them to the necessity of having evidences in a research, such as a field journal where they would write down everything they did and learned. When asked about what kind of evidence they thought they would need, they said they would also need to conduct interviews, take photos and make videos.

In the following sessions, we worked on interviews and observations. Each young participant would interview another student from the group while another student would observe them. The focus of the interview was what they did and learned during the weekend. Once they were done with the interviews, the young participants wrote what they had learned from the experience. For instance, some mentioned that it would be important to have proper questions in order to obtain the desired information and that sometimes it is necessary to familiarize the interviewee with the interview in order not to change the meaning of the questions. In order to work on different ways of making observations, we asked a collaborator of our university research group to conduct a single session about techniques of observation. In the following sessions, we decided to carry out observations on different environments including the school playground, the streets and a classroom. Once the observations were completed, we told the young participants to group their notes together in different categories to help their analysis. When we examined and discussed their notes, they said that they had learned different types of observation, to carry out observations correctly, not to take things at face value, but to observe and question everything as if it were the first time they had witnessed it.

As the young participants were collecting evidences for their research through their field journals, photos, recordings and notes from their interviews and observations, we were doing quite the same. We both kept individual field journals, we took photos from our sessions with the young participants and we recorded the audio from some sessions. As the young participants had their data, we had ours, although our data also included the evidences recollected by them. From the beginning, we had a teacher who was our contact in our school. She had talked to the other teachers and the headmaster so that we arrived at the school with the project already explained, discussed and accepted. Nevertheless, our first talks with the teachers responsible for both groups of students (A and B) were about the project, what we would do and how the sessions would be. As we did not want to reproduce the usual classroom dynamics, one first concern arose when the teachers responsible for both groups demanded detailed information about each work session so that they could help. Despite our initial concerns, we opted for the maximum possible interaction with the teachers through regular meetings, although, one of them would never come. During these meetings, we would give information about the progress of the work and make all due arrangements for the future sessions. The group A teacher took part in these meetings while the group B teacher, who almost never talked to us, chose to keep herself apart from the project.

Her role in the project was basically limited to: a) allowing 4 of

her students to miss one hour of her class to work with us and b) accepting that their curriculum required research project would be the one they did with us. Work with the young participants may be divided into three different phases: a) the first phase was about learning how to do the research and recollecting the data, b) the second involved the writing of the reports and the preparation of the presentations for the school, c) the third comprehended the preparation of the presentation for the university. Our data included our field journals, audio recordings, photos and all the data produced by the young participants such as their interviews, observations and field notes. In order to analyse all our data, we built categories using the grounded theory. Thanks to that, inclusion and segregation emerged as a relevant topic, something that was not one of our goals. Thus, besides the categories built around the central themes of our research (learning in and outside school and new literacies), we were able to analyse the data related to the inclusion and segregation, but to do that, we had to recodify all the data we had, following the guidelines of the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

RESULTS

Dealing with our own expectations and preconceptions

As university teachers, we always teach groups that have no clear distinctions between or within them. Although, we may hear comments from our colleagues such as "the afternoon groups work harder and ask more questions than the morning groups" or "the morning groups are a bit more immature than the afternoon groups", there are really no objective criteria that separate one group of university students from the other or students inside a given group. Thus, whatever expectation we have towards our students at the university, they are not backed up by any solid evidence. Nevertheless, in our research we did previously know which young participants came from each group and how their school labelled them. Thus, we had to deal with our own expectations and prejudices. After the first session with our young participants, we commented that we could not distinguish between the young people from the two different groups (A and B). After the second session, however, we began to notice some differences. For example, the graphic representations of their interests were noticeably different in terms of the content, the depth of development and the level of imagination shown. The two young people from the group A presented graphic schemes clearly less elaborate than the others. At the end of that session, we decided to try: a) not to stigmatise any of the participants, b) to "forget" which groups they belonged to and c) to help the cohesion of the group.

Quite obviously, our good intentions were: a) a naiveté because we could not forget who was from which group; b) a sign of our own troubles dealing with the information provided by the school about the young participants; c) the expression of our own inclusive education ideals. As

mentioned before, the teacher responsible for the group B almost did not participate in the project, but we kept a constant contact with the group A teacher, who was frequently asking us about her students' participation and how well they were working. Once, for instance, she asked us to assess their Catalan[2] expertise since we all interacted in Catalan and they were missing Catalan classes to take part in the project. The comparisons between her students and the group B students seemed almost inevitable during our meetings. As she did participate much more than the other teacher and helped her students organise their journals and materials for the sessions, it sometimes seemed as if she was trying to help them working in a situation of supposed disadvantage. Although, her attitude towards the students sometimes seemed to be a little patronising and we felt like we should always give her good news about her students, she seemed quite open to learning from the experience and was very concerned about her students. It was clear to us that we did not want to repeat her attitude and show a patronising, protective, benevolent attitude towards the group A participants, but we had also noticed our own trouble in trying to "forget" who came from which group. Such tension between the protective, benevolent attitude and our inclusive ideals was always present in our field journals.

The evolving relationship between the participants from A and B groups

The relationship between group A and group B participants proved challenging from the beginning. It is important to remember that they had never worked together before and that the differences between both groups were well known to all of them. In other words, the "special" nature of the youth from group A was no secret. An example of the troubles in the relationship between both groups happened when, asked by us, Ellen[3] from group A presented an observation she had done outside school during the weekend. Ellen was obviously not comfortable speaking to the group. She was nervous and her shyness finally turned into aggressiveness and hostility as some members of the group B kept talking and laughing while she spoke. Finally, we had to intervene demanding respect and attention. After that session we asked ourselves the question: why is it so difficult for these groups to work together in a situation like this? One possible answer came after another session: in a meeting with the school's course coordinator, she expressed her concerns about mixing students from such different groups, particularly about the welfare of

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[2]In Catalonia, people speak both Spanish and Catalan and public schools use a Catalan immersion system in which all classes are given in Catalan, except for the other languages' classes such as Spanish or English.
[3]All names are pseudonyms.

group A. We explained that the small size of the group smoothed the integration of the students and that the group A participants had been more proactive than group B in keeping their journals.

As the project progressed, the integration of the group evolved in a positive direction and its heterogeneous character resulted in benefits for both groups. Members of group A conquered their feelings of inferiority and resistance to share ideas and opinions and group B ended up being influenced by the enthusiasm and hard word of group A. Initially, only group A kept their journals updated, much to the surprise of group B, who then started to show more interest. Anyway, during the first phase of their work, they learned to work together, share and distribute tasks. During the second phase of the investigation, when the participants had to write their reports, the dynamic built by and between them was interrupted. Impervious to the inclusive experience of our research, the school required that the students completed their fourth-grade academic research projects according to their original groups. Although, they had been working together all the time in the same research project, they were forced to present two different reports (one for the group A and another for the group B). For the first time since they had started working in our project, they had to work separately: the two participants from the group A and the four from the group B. As it could be expected, the group A participants were the ones that suffered the most from the return of the segregation. Despite our guidance, they presented a quite superficial report and their public presentation also suffered from the lack of details and clarity.

On the third and final phase of the project, the young participants were required by us to present their research at the university for teachers, families, friends and the participants of the other four schools. Once again, all six of them worked together as a single group because the presentation required the collaborative effort of all of them. They produced results that were highly satisfactory for everyone involved. At the post-presentation gathering, the young participants commented that the groups from other schools had read out their presentations whereas they had explained their project. Analysing the evolution of their relationship and their work together, we came to some certainties, questions and hypothesis. Comparing the different moments of their relationship, it seems clear that a segregation based schooling does not help to build a good convivial climate between students that are labelled as special needs and the ones who are considered as normal. More than feelings of shame or inferiority, the need for protection against the so-called normal students shocked us the most. Concretely, the fear and the correspondingly need for protection felt by the group A teacher and school's course coordinator made us wonder about the discourses surrounding a segregation environment. It was not only about getting a

special attention or a flexible evaluation, but also being protected from the others. As the evolution of our project showed, there was really nothing to be afraid of, nothing that could not be overcome by working inclusively together. As for the participants from group B who were surprised by the work done by the group A, finding common interests and experiences between them and the others seemed to be a pleasant surprise.

When the participants were forced to work separately again, the boy and the girl from group A were the ones that had more trouble writing their report and preparing their presentation. On the one hand, it was clear that they still needed their companions from group B to fully make sense of what they had done. On the other hand, when they got back together to prepare the final presentation, they were able to do much more, which reminds us of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vadeboncoeur and Collie, 2013). The school's rules, rigidity and lack of interest were once more an obstacle to change or, in this case, a way to perpetuate segregation. Demanding separate reports of the same project done altogether by the participants from groups A and B is an example of rigidity that is hard to explain or understand. If they had required individual reports from each participant, it would be easier to understand, although, educationally conservative as well. Moreover, the lack of interest from the teacher of the group B could be understood as a random event or also as a resistance to change. We worked weekly with her students for 4 months and she never asked us anything. As the other teacher (group A) did quite the opposite, we cannot say which one better represents the school, but we can affirm that the school as an institution seemed unchanged by our project. Our main questions here are about the possible relations between the segregational practices and the teachers.

It is well known that segregating can be more easily accepted by teachers than inclusive practices. The challenge of working with heterogeneous groups within a traditional education framework can be overwhelming to most teachers and inclusive teaching with cooperative learning is yet too innovative for many of them. Both teachers affected by our project worked within a traditional segregational school. It is not known whether their opposite reactions to our project are related or not to the students with whom they worked. Would the concerned and protective teacher of group A show the same attitude and interest if her group were a "regular" one? Would the indifferent teacher of group B be more interested if she had a special needs group? How does having a special needs group affect a teacher? We obviously do not have the answers for these questions, as they were not actually part of our research goals. However, we can hypothesize that the special education tradition has its influence on the teachers that are assigned to the special groups. The need to give a specialized attention to the students' special needs may

translate into a high interest, a protective stance and a concern about how they interact with regular students. As for the regular students' teacher, she could certainly have shown more interest or even worry about what her students might be losing by working with their special needs' companions. Anyway, it seemed that the segregation was not limited to the students, as both teachers would not talk to each other either.

Conclusion

Segregation in education is a very old schooling practice that can nevertheless find support in some medical, psychological and pedagogical discourses that try to identify, isolate and treat the causes of educational failure in a specialised way. These discourses tend to consider the causes as individual and not social ones. Although, a "good" specialised treatment of the individual educational needs could even be seen as proper educational attention, not only its assumptions (an individual and not a social problem) but its practices produce limitations and enforce social barriers that help to maintain those who do not fit in the system in a position in which they cannot integrate and fully participate in the society (Graham et al., 2010). Such precarious position is certainly not new and, as we could see in our research, may help reproduce well-known social barriers inside the school. Perhaps, the barrier that surprised us the most was the fear. In the past, many social prejudices and segregational policies were fed on fear of what was considered strange or abnormal. However, the fear we found was the fear of the "normal" kids. Of course, it may be well founded due to the common social hostile reactions against what is different, but it called our attention that a school's course coordinator and a teacher could end up being afraid of an inclusive process. Our research experience showed us that the special needs label has its impact on teachers, students and researchers as we ourselves had to deal with it. More than labels, inclusive education is about recognising the educational needs and motivations of everyone. Our inclusive experience shows that, when working together in an active cooperative learning environment, all the participants may profit from the experience, learn and build constructive relationships. Nevertheless, it is also clear that segregation affects both students and teachers in different ways. We think that it would be interesting to do further research about how special needs teachers are part of their institutions and how they relate to their colleagues. What does it mean to be a teacher in charge of a special needs' group inside a regular segregational school?

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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