School success of Moroccan youth in Barcelona. Theoretical insights for practical questions

Éxito escolar y jóvenes de origen marroquí en Barcelona. Apuestas teóricas para cuestiones prácticas

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Resumen

El artículo analiza la relación que se establece entre la identidad étnica y las actuaciones escolares de los jóvenes de origen marroquí de Barcelona, particularmente en los casos de éxito académico. Para ello se comentan ejemplos etnográficos que describen las estrategias utilizadas por algunos de estos jóvenes y familias para superar las barreras lingüísticas, sociales y culturales que encuentran a su paso por la institución escolar y en la sociedad de acogida. Estos mismos ejemplos sirven para relativizar la calidad heurística de la topología "minoría inmigrada/minoría involuntaria" de John Ogbu en el contexto de la variabilidad académica que se da entre los jóvenes de origen marroquí según su pertenencia étnica, clase social y genero. Los resultados de la investigación etnográfica reciente ponen de manifiesto que el éxito escolar de las minorías inmigradas no está necesariamente asociado al rechazo de la cultura de origen ni al desarrollo de actitudes conformistas hacia la cultura dominante. Muchos jóvenes de origen marroquí, por ejemplo, adoptan una visión instrumental de la educación formal que promueve el desarrollo de identidades culturales nuevas y proactivas tanto fuera como dentro de la arena escolar.

Abstract

This article addresses the relationship between ethnic identity and school performance of Moroccan youth living in Barcelona (Spain), particularly in cases of academic success. The bulk of the article makes reference to examples from ethnographical research to pinpoint the strategies used by some of these youths and their families to transcend the cultural, linguistic, and social barriers they face both in school and in their wider community. In so doing, we shift our gaze from John Ogbu's immigrant/involuntary typology to the patterns of variability along ethnic, class and gender lines that exist within this minority group. Results from recent ethnographic research points out that high academic performance does not necessarily entails neither rejection of ethnicity nor simple conformity. Rather, some of these Moroccan youth adopt an instrumental view of education that promotes the development of new and proactive cultural identities inside and outside the school arena.

Palabras clave: Identidad étnica, éxito escolar, minoría inmigrada, pertenencia étnica, clase social, genero, resistencia, acomodación

Keywords: Ethnic identity, school success, immigrant minority, ethnicity, class and gender, resistance, accommodation

INTRODUCTION

This is not a conventional article about the academic performance of minority students. In it, you will find few statistics related to the level of achievement of Moroccan youth students in Barcelona, little interest to discover the causes that determine 'their' academic failure, but a conscious effort to look into their daily school life with justice and optimism. I am aware of the limitations that this option has to deal with, both technically and scientifically. Although there has never been any systematic effort to record the academic performance and paths of Moroccan students living in Spain, it seems that many of the insights made in this field have forgotten to embed what should be one of the most important attitudes in any critical approach: the epistemological suspicion.

This is not to say that Moroccan students, or migrant minorities in general, do not suffer the effects of school ethnocentrism and xenophobia, as it has been proved by different studies about multicultural education and school dynamics in Spain and other western countries (McCarthy 1994; Gillborn 1995; IOE 1996; Carbonell 1997). However, in order to claim the necessity of rethinking the relationship that exists between ethnic identity and school performance, we need to point out the diversity of located points from which one can experience, interpret and plan social and educational projects -even inside what we constrain as 'Moroccan youth' and their families-, and the possibility of performing academically well in spite of the 'cultural' and 'structural' barriers that would affect 'Muslim' groups according to certain points of view.

To do that, I plan to make a strategic use of John Ogbu's theoretical framework, trying to accommodate some of his thesis about the academic performance of minority students into the Spanish context. Some North American and European authors have already made similar efforts in order to understand why some minority groups are more successful than others. This exercise, nevertheless, can entail at least two risks: on the one hand, the tendency to naturalise group hierarchies via an a-critical use of the ethnic criteria that serves to define the samples and, on the other hand, the imposition of a biased interpretation of what 'success' means if we are not sensitive enough as to consider the political dimension of any official definition.

Alerted against the perverse consequences of these attitudes by the works of authors like Margaret Gibson (1988) and Signithia Fordham (1996), and by my previous experience in different research projects, I co-authored four studies on the vast field of 'minority education' between 1999 and 2002 (vide Bibliography). Their ethnographic data constitute the corpus of information used in this article to talk about the strategies used by Moroccan youth to manage the cultural, linguistic, and social barriers they face both in school and in their wider community. In so doing, I propose shift our gaze from Ogbu's immigrant/involuntary typology to the patterns of variability along ethnic, class and gender lines that exist within this minority group. Results from our ethnographic research points out that high academic performance among Moroccan youth does not necessarily entails neither rejection of ethnicity nor simple conformity. Rather, some of these youths adopt an instrumental view of education that promotes the development of new and proactive cultural identities inside and outside the school arena (Herrera 2002; Bonal et al 2003;).

PATTERNS AND QUESTIONS

My studies of Moroccan youth students call attention to the specific nature of this immigrant group's 'folk theory' of success (Ogbu 1998) and educational strategies. More specifically, they examine the interrelationship between the original cultural background of Moroccan families as it is in Barcelona, their experiences prior to immigration, their specific social and economic situation in the new setting, the structure and dynamics of the community in which they have settled, and the influences of these forces on educational projects and school performance.

Many of the families that have migrated from North Africa during the last 10 years come to Barcelona not to flee poverty as much as to improve their family's welfare and economic situation. They believe educational and job opportunities would be much better for their children and relatives in Barcelona than in rural or urban Magrib. They also believe that they could adapt relatively easily to life in Spain because of the availability of specific employment niches, the emergence of a community of co-ethnics, the possibility of turning to family members for assistance if necessary, and the possibility of reproducing their symbolic universe due to the geographical closeness between the peninsula and their homeland (Herrera 2002).

Many of the adults and young adults arrive in Barcelona with few saleable skills apart from their practical knowledge of farming or under-valued academic qualifications. Out of necessity, most of them have no other choice on arrival but to accept backbreaking jobs as bricklayers, maids and farm labourers, usually under precarious conditions and for minimum wage. Given this panorama, Moroccan families have to struggle financially, but some of them, after a decade of austerity, hard work and sharing resources and commodities with members of the extended family, have been able to purchase their own car, flat or even to set up a corner shop in specific neighbourhoods.

Although there is burning evidence of racist attitudes and hostile attacks directed at migrant minorities in Spain (ECRI 1999; Martinez Veiga 2001), most of the Moroccan adults interviewed try to minimise the negative consequences of their interaction with the mainstream population and to avoid a strategy of response and counter-response. Moroccan families, even those arrived from rural regions that attract more the attention and susceptibilities of local people, are generally protected from the most harmful effects of xenophobia not only by a strong ethnic identity and a positive community sense, but also by the determination of their immigrant project of social mobility (Herrera 2002). Accordingly to Ogbu one important distinguishing feature of migrant minorities is that they have a positive 'dual frame of reference' (1998), at least during the first generation. This may provide them with motivation to succeed and to develop a pragmatic trust towards the institutions controlled by the dominant group of the host society, like the school system and the labour market.

The situation for Moroccan youth who have regular contact with peers, schoolmates and teachers is considerably different. Both in school and in the street, Moroccan youth encounter strong pressures to conform to the dominant culture and a climate of racial hostility that permeates their experiences and detracts from the quality of their lives. Many of them experience sharp conflict between some of their family values and those promoted by the school and youth culture, and they have to deal with criticism, condemnation and tough forms of symbolic abuse for their dress, diet, religion, language and, most specially, for resisting assimilation (Alegre & Herrera 2000).

As I came to understand the structure and dynamics of Moroccan communities in Barcelona, I also came to see that educational performance patterns were not those I had anticipated, even when

average Spanish students were doing better in secondary school than Moroccans. Differences of achievement, although perceptible, do not simply happen along purely ethnic lines but also according to the specific interplay of attributive and contextual variables (on one hand, gender and social class, on the other hand, new and former social setting and family values). That issue proves the existence of diversity in school performance along and across ethnic minority groups (Herrera 2002; Bonal et al 2003).

Furthermore, both the high rate of 'academic failure' recorded in Barcelona at the end of compulsory education (between 25 and 30 %, according to official criteria – Vila, Gomez-Granell & Martinez 2002) and the relatively low 'school life expectancy' among working class students after compulsory education (INCE 2000), problematizes to a certain extent the stigmatisation of Moroccan / 'Muslim' youth as academic failures. Certain barriers related to the minority status of the parents of Moroccan youth do prevail: low income, little experience in formal education, lack of familiarity with mainstream culture and limited knowledge of the Spanish official languages. In addition there exists a climate of severe prejudice and cultural misunderstandings in school and other institutions. However, many Moroccan youth who arrive to Barcelona during the early elementary years, and many of those who arrive at a later age, persevere in school and meet at least the minimum requirements for a secondary school certificate or a graduation diploma (Herrera 2002).

AN INTERPRETATION

How can we account for the particular experiences of 'academic success' of these Moroccan youth that share few of the characteristics that literature has associated with success in school? The answer, I believe, lies in part in overcoming the 'culture vs. structure' epistemological dichotomy and in the consideration of the 'community forces' (Ogbu 1998) on the academic engagement or disengagement of minority students.

Newer studies in the field of sociology and anthropology of education consider both the 'cultural discontinuity hypothesis' and the 'structural inequality theory' deficient frameworks for explaining the school performance of minority students (Jacob & Jordan 1987, 1993). In the first instance, cultural and language differences between home and school do not necessarily cause poor performance (Gibson 1988), and in the second, social inequalities and school discrimination do not always lead to oppositional practices against this institution, or lack of investment in formal education (Erickson 1987).

Furthermore, neither of them explains why some minorities are more successful in facing adversity than other previously established groups (e.g. Punjabis vs. African Americans in USA; Moroccan vs. Gypsies in Spain; etc.). Nor do these theories pay attention to the kin/community culture aspects (beliefs about effort, discipline and authority) that could eventually help minority students to perform well academically, or to the school-adaptation possibilities of those minority groups that have a negative learning experience even when they have overcome the initial obstacles (e.g. lack of linguistic competencies, estrangement with dominant culture and values, and so forth).

Ogbu's comparative studies on the variability in school performance patterns among different kinds of minority groups ('immigrant minorities' and 'involuntary minorities) represent, from 1974, an important exception in this sense. For almost three decades, his work and that of other authors close to him has produced mounting evidence to suggest that the educational strategies and school performance of

minority students are critically influenced by (a) the specific history of majority-minority group contact, (b) the minority group's perspective on its own situation of subordination, and (c) its interpretation of the socio-economic opportunities available to its members (Ogbu 1974, 1978, 2003; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Gibson 1988; Gibson & Ogbu 1991; Suarez-Orozco 1991; Fordham 1996). In Ogbu's view (2003, p.51-52):

> The way minorities interpret their history –whether they became minorities voluntarily [e.g. through immigration] or involuntarily [e.g. through conquest, colonisation or slavery], together with the impact of societal treatment or mistreatment- shapes the pattern of the collective solutions they forge for the collective problems in society at large in education. Because of their different modes of incorporation, voluntary and involuntary minorities tend to interpret similar problems differently and forge different solutions to those problems.

According to this 'cultural-ecological' perspective (Obgu 1998), minority groups' behaviour may be seen at least in part as a sociocultural adaptation related to their own structure of possibilities. In this sense, Ogbu posed in his first major publication (1974, p. 3):

> Can we adequately explain the high proportion of school failures among the subordinate minorities [e.g. involuntary] without taking into account the historical basis for their association with the dominant whites and their experiences in that association? […] The high proportion of school failure among subordinate minorities constitutes an adaptation to their lack of full opportunity to benefit from their education in contrast to dominant group.

Which perceptions of and responses to school rules, expectations and culture predominate among Moroccan families in Barcelona? How much do these appraisals have to do with their status as an immigrant minority and their dual frame of reference? Do Moroccan students conceive the teaching-learning process as a way of becoming assimilated into the dominant culture, or as an investment to acquire marketable credentials and additional skills? How do folk theories of success shape the 'structural rationales' (D'Amato 1993) that guide Moroccan youth performance?

Based on my own fieldwork and ethnographic research on minority students' compliance and resistance in school, I suggest that there is a direct and strong relationship between the school adaptation patterns of Moroccan students and their family's immigrant status (and related mobility project). The focus of my gaze has been the role of family and community forces in promoting academic success, but I have also considered how the articulation of social and cultural relations of power inside and outside the school can operate to discourage first generation Moroccan students from complying with school expectations. In general, however, available data shows that:

- -Most Moroccan families and youths alike view formal education and the credentials it confers as instrumental in their strategy of upward social mobility in Barcelona. These youth believe that success at secondary school (whether vocational training or higher education) will help them to improve their social status and economic welfare (Herrera 2002; Bonal et al 2003).

- -Although parents are generally concerned about the existence of uncomfortable conditions in schools related, for instance, to racial hostilities or to pervasive pressures to westernise their children, most of them assume that academic success is the result of hard work and

discipline. They would not accept 'social disadvantages' or 'teachers' incompetence' as excuses for poor performance or disruptive behaviour (Alegre & Herrera 2000; Herrera 2002).

▪ -Both Moroccan boys and girls have a strong rationale for compliance with school rules and authority and, at the same time, keep within the Magrib folder. The watchful eye of their parents and a well-organised set of community forces would sanction any conduct likely to shame their family's reputation (e.g. taking youth out temporarily from school, making them work hard, etc.) (Alegre & Herrera 2000; Herrera 2002).

-Moroccan youth predominantly advocate a strategy of 'accommodation without assimilation' (Gibson 1988) towards the dominant structures and dynamics of the host society. The realisation of this pattern may differ depending on the nature of the social, cultural, and economic resources available in each settlement, and on the relative position these youth occupy within it according to their particular histories and characteristics. Nonetheless, most Moroccan parents encourage their sons and daughters to become proficient in many skills of the dominant culture while also counselling them to remain loyal to their cultural origins (Alegre & Herrera 2000; Herrera 2002; Bonal et al 2003).

Here is how some interviewee put it:

> We would like our son to study. The first thing he does when he arrives at home is the homework. After that he usually watches Moroccan or Spanish TV. We say him all the time 'Study. Study hard', because he wants to be an engineer. (Father)

> Yes, I would like my sister and brother to study here in Barcelona because in Morocco there are no opportunities. She is studying Catalan in a school and after that we plan her to go to a private college to study tourism management. My brother has just arrived from Morocco and has failed many subjects. Next year he will probably do the same course. (Sibling)

> I have to do many things at home. But this is normal because they are my family. My parents always tell me 'First of all do your homework'. And once I have finished it I help them or I do other things that I like. […] They are not tedious parents because they realise that I behave well. I do my things and then they allow me to go with my cousins. I really like to go out with my cousins. (Girl)

The condition for performing well in school may not be the displacement of 'old' values by 'modern' ones, but rather an additive process in which Moroccan youth embed the instrumental competences and public attitudes to get ahead in mainstream society while maintaining an expressive adhesion towards their re-contextualized group culture. Certainly, results from European research suggests that high academic performance does not necessarily imply unconditional adhesion to the dominant culture, and stresses the historically dynamic nature of the immigrants' adaptation patterns and identities (Suarez-Orozco 1991; Crul 2000; Lindo 2000; van Nieker 2000; Bonal et al 2003). In our case, ethnographic data show that many Moroccan youth living in Barcelona maintain a utilitarian relationship with the larger society and a strategy of 'multilinear acculturation' (Gibson 1988) that promotes the development of proactive identities according to the school requirements. Yet it would be a misunderstanding of these findings to conclude that most Moroccan students cope successfully with school expectations when clearly they do not. For many of them, the combination of socio-economic disadvantages and institutional barriers is difficult to overcome. Some recent research on minority education has precisely focused on the patterns of variability existing inside immigrant groups

(Hermans 1995; Crul 2000; Tsolidis 2001; Bonal et al 2003) helping us to shift our gaze from Ogbu's holistic theory to explore the specific intersections of ethnicity, gender and class that exist within these groups in particular settings.

THE COMPLICATION OF THEORY

While Ogbu's perspective has had tremendous influence on highlighting the impact of status and power relations on students' achievements, I will suggest that a more sensitive and encompassing framework is needed to account for the variability of minority school outcomes in European countries in general and in Spain in particular. Previous cross-national comparisons have pointed out that Ogbu's 'migrant' vs. 'involuntary' minority distinctions do not fit as comfortably in Europe as they do in traditional immigrant-receiving countries such as the United States, Canada or Israel (Gibson 1997). At the same time, this same research on minority education has posed the explanatory role of complementary factors such as specific legislation, labour market structure, school dynamics, gender and social class that may operate in specific situations. According to this evidence and my own research the heuristic value of Ogbu's framework could be subject to further thoughts:

- ▪ -Qualitative research highlights the variability of educational performance both across and within minority groups. Moroccan students are, in the aggregate, less willing to deal with school expectations than for instance, their Chinese peers; but each group is internally differentiated along social class, gender and ethnic lines in ways that are also associated with the discriminatory effects of social dynamics on particular groups and biographies. Enclosing Moroccan youth as members of a voluntary or immigrant minority should not be the central issue, but the identification, analysis and fighting of forms of oppression that cut across each other sometimes in dramatic ways. A combination of racist and sexist stereotypes, for example, could make it difficult for Moroccan boys to succeed in school in spite of the positive influence of their family values.

- ▪ -It is scientifically problematic to perpetuate our practice of naming minority groups when it entails the reification of 'ethnicity' as a hypostatic reality. Obviously this is not part of Ogbu's agenda, but the dichotomous use of his typology could reinforce dominant stereotypes of 'model minorities' (notably from Asia) as academically diligent whilst others (especially African-descendants) as being ready to blame the school authorities for their lack of cultural sensibility. Legitimate questions remain as well regarding how 'failure' and 'achievement' are usually taken as dependent variables rather than deconstructed as powerful artefacts of the education system.

- ▪ -Other major criticisms of the model is that it overlooks generational differences that affect the collective history of minority groups, the nature of family biographies, and the dynamic interplay of identities negotiated within ethnic minorities and between them and the dominant culture. Empirical evidence shows how the situation of some first generation Moroccan youth and families living in Barcelona resembles that of Ogbu's involuntary minorities, or that of De Vos and Suarez-Orozco 'disparaged' minorities (1990), because of their persistent exclusion from the social and the economic system. These factors could even have a greater influence on students' achievements than the initial terms on which Moroccan families were incorporated into Barcelona's society, and are closely related to the recent development of

reactive ethnic identities among some Moroccan youngsters (Alegre & Herrera 2000; Herrera 2002).

- ▪ -Those researchers who have connected the academic performance of minority students with the micropolitics of the school would think that Ogbu's framework gives inadequate attention to the variety of factors operating inside this political institution (Gillborn 1995; Cummins 1996). Systematic barriers to Moroccan students' academic improvement in Barcelona include, for example, teachers' low expectations of them, ethnocentric curricula that deny alternative experiences, and low representation of co-ethnics among staff (Alegre & Herrera 2000; Herrera 2002; Bonal et al 2003). Under these conditions, it would be easy for Moroccan youth who experience discrimination to radicalise both primary and secondary cultural differences between them and the majority group in a similar way to the African American youth interviewed by Signithia Fordham (1996) in her research on the construction of blacks' school success and failure.

The case of Moroccan students in Barcelona alerts us to the fragility, limitations, and political agenda of any theoretical artefact. Yet it seems reasonable to argue that explanations of the academic patterns of minority students in specific settings should move beyond orthodox readings and also include an analysis of how broader social structures and ideologies - racism, sexism, meritocracy, etc. - find their way into the school dynamics (e.g. expectations, curriculum, counselling, tracking, and so forth) and are embodied in students' experiences and performance.

GENERAL IMPLICATIONS

The general purpose of this article has been to analyse how ethnographical evidence of the variability of school performance across and within ethnic minorities poses direct challenges to theory. In so doing I have explored two related questions: what are the strengths and shortcomings of Ogbu's 'cultural-ecological' model when applied outside a 'settler society' (Ogbu 1998)? And what are the possibilities for Moroccan youth to perform academically in a cultural organisation that embodies power relations operating in the broader society?

Based on the data available, the case of Moroccan families and youth in Barcelona appears to provide us with a situation where their status as immigrants - and thus, their mobility projects and educational strategies - plays a central role in the expression of a proactive orientation to school very similar to those described by Gibson (1988) and Suarez-Orozco (1991). The pragmatic purpose of school is emphasized, the conflicts that emerge in school-family relations are considered but deflated, and school success is personalised as an outcome of hard work and discipline.

At the same time, empirical work at the school level provides an impetus to theorize ethnicity and academic performance in dynamic rather than static terms, as elements of fluid processes of constructions and oppressions that takes place in a political context that insists on legitimising academic failure on the backs of specific groups. Perhaps most important, research directions that would prove most fruitful in accounting for the school success of depreciated students such as Moroccans in Barcelona and Spain could be those that connect both the macro- and micro-levels and remind us the agency of individuals. With regard to this point, I suggest the interest of exploring the terms in which school perceives and poses the meaning of ethnic minority students' identities. Do teachers depict ethnicity as a manifestation of a static and ancestral culture stirring up prejudices

rather than combating them? Or are ethnic identities interpreted from a less deterministic point of view, as relational and sensitive constructs crossed by other categories of difference that define inter-group power relations, and open to accommodate into specific historic situations and changing economic structures, both in the host society and in the country of origin?

In comparison to U.S., Canada and some European countries, it is not the case that Spanish educational policy addresses ethnic issues frankly. During the 1990s, Spanish multicultural rhetoric was severely criticized on the grounds that it was constructed upon compensatory ideologies that tended to discredit minorities' cultures. Unfortunately, this reality has not been challenged. Resistance to racist education has been strong among some particular school districts and 'after-school' youth clubs, but concerns of social justice and equality of opportunities seem to remain outside the agenda of mainstream political reforms (Herrera, Albaiges & Garet 2003). 'Intercultural education' (as the new rhetoric has been officially re-named) has become socially uncommitted for many academics because of its naïve complacence with current power relations and its decaffeinated attitude against the commodification of education.

My own earlier work, and related ethnographic research on minority students compliance and resistance in schools (Gibson 1988; Cummins 1996; Gibson and Ogbu 1991; Crul 2000; Tomlinson 2001), has provided me with the stimulus and the theoretical rational to hypothesize that Moroccan youth would follow, in the aggregate, different patterns of school performance from those of newer arrivals whenever racism and other discriminatory practices will not persist within schools and other major institutions. I assume as well that the eventual use of Moroccans' distinctive marks (e.g. religion, language, dressing) to stigmatise their identity could lead to the radicalisation of their primary and secondary differences, the impermeabilization of their cultural adhesions, and even to the development of resistance attitudes against the dominant culture and the school expectations.

Focusing on issues related to the reality of institutionalised racism in the educational system, the 'song-and-dance' intercultural rhetoric, and the marginalisation of structural discrimination issues in the new educational policy agenda does not deny the validity of the 'family mobilisation' thesis or the influence of community forces on students' performance, but highlights the fact that human relationships are embedded within a matrix of historical and current power relations between different social groups.

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