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The Transformational Potential of Higher Education Inclusion: Biographical Trajectories of Students from Disadvantaged Environments in Venezuela

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General structure

Chapter 1. Introduction

The genesis of the research project

Chapter 2. Inclusion to (higher) education

2.1 Locating my research within the field of sociology of education

2.2 The debate of educational inequality in Latin America

2.3 The Inclusion Era

2.4 The debate on higher education inclusion in Latin America

2.5 Summary of the chapter

Chapter 3. Theoretical Embedding

3.1 Education and social inequality: The premises of Pierre Bourdieu

3.2 Us vs. them: Norbert Elias and the relation between established and outsiders

Chapter 4. Methodological framework

4.1 Biographical research

4.2 Data collection

4.4 Further methods

Chapter 5. (Higher) education expansion as a sociopolitical issue

5.1 Background

5.2 The Fifth Republic: 1999-2013: Venezuelan's Participatory Democracy

5.3 The Bolivarian Missions

Chapter 6. Municipalization of higher education through Mission Sucre

6.1 Mission Sucre

6.2 An ethnographic approach to Mission Sucre

6.3 Summary of the chapter

Chapter 7. Case reconstructions and typology

7.1 Type A: Chance seekers/ Opportunity driven

7.2 Type B: The overwhelmed/ the helpless

7.2.1 Case reconstruction: Yenni García

Chapter 8. Results: The biographical meaning of inclusion to higher education

- 8.1 Implication of the creation of Mission Sucre
- 8.2 The inclusion experience of Mission Sucre participants
- 8.3 Theoretical discussion
- 8.4 Limitations of the research project
- 8.5 The road ahead?

Appendices

References

Summary:

In the field of higher education research, one of the most fascinating observations is the consistent and permanent expansion of higher education systems worldwide since the end of the Second World War. Undoubtedly, the predominant approach to address these developments has been through quantitative analysis, as well as international comparisons. One can trace back some similarities (and differences) in different regions of the world where through different approaches higher education has been widened to include all groups. By doing this, the governments in charge of these reforms try to close gaps among social groups, eradicate poverty, and promote development. My dissertation seeks to address this issue in light of recent developments in Venezuela, where a major transformation of the system has been implemented since the early 2000s. My research deals with this transformation of the system between 1998 and 2013, where one can observe a pragmatic approach to higher education for all with the coexistence of different kinds of institutions, a complex student body and staff as well as different ideas of what the university is for. The objective of my work is to analyze the long process that certain social groups have gone through to gain access to (higher) education and the meaning that these experiences of exclusion and inclusion has for them.

The idea to focus on the experiences of students and how higher education has impacted their lives was a decision that shaped my work both as a methodology and a theoretical approach based on the premises of the interpretative paradigm of social research. This research project started in October 2011 and over the course of my research I conducted three field phases in Venezuela in 2012 and 2013. I managed to gather data from a variety of sources by using different methods: biographical narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 1995; 2001) with higher education students of Mission Sucre, participant observations at higher education institutions across the country and ethnographic interviews with higher education staff and experts on educational policy and research. The contribution of my work is a discussion of the biographical meaning of inclusion to higher education for my interview partners. However, I seek to offer a

theoretical discussion to be able to discuss both the particularities of the Venezuelan case but also a more abstract contribution for the current debate on higher education inclusion.