

The unequal construction of the student experience in young university students from south of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.

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Abstract. Various studies show that the massification observed in universities over the last two decades has occurs alongside the incorporation of a student population that is, predominantly, the first generation of university students in their families. This research shows that, in the case of the most disadvantaged sectors, the inclusion of young people in the education system is the result of an accumulation of disadvantages in educational and social conditions. The research framed in this paper aims to understand the complex web that shapes the student experience of young people who have recently entered universities in the south of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, identifying the dimensions that define, promote or hinder academic achievement and permanence in universities. Within this framework, the objective is to describe and interpret their educational trajectories, the cultural practices that are part of their daily and social life, the media and technological practices of access to knowledge, their experiences as new students, their expectations about their immediate academic and more immediate professional and/or employment future, among others. For the development of the research, a methodological complementarity is chosen, which articulates quantitative and qualitative research techniques and strategies.

Keywords: University - Youth - Secondary education

1 Introduction

In the perspective of education as a right for everyone, during the last decades - especially since the regulation of mandatory secondary school in Argentina in 2006 - a variety of inclusion programmes and policies have been developed by the National State and by the institutions themselves with the aim of promoting and ensuring the entry and graduation of students at university. In the structural and conjunctural context of economic crisis and post-pandemic, the socio-economic and cultural inequalities that affect students are worsening. Argentina's public universities receive students whose educational trajectories have been strongly affected by the consequences of the economic crisis and socio-cultural backgrounds originating in the aforementioned context. Within this framework, the research focuses on the processes of unequal construction of the student experience of students during the first years of their university education and the ways in which this is related to digital biographies, cultural practices and the construction of future expectations, in the particular and situated context of public universities in the south of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.

2 Theoretical Framework

For the analysis of the university student experience, the socio-cultural perspective of studies on contemporary youth cultures was assumed, which account for the emergence of generational cultural expressions that re-signify global cultural productions in local scenarios. The processes of socialization coexist with diverse forms of subjectivation, which challenge young people to become themselves, assuming different tactics, individually and jointly, in the face of institutional conditioning factors (Weiss, 2012). It is considered that, although the student experience is a key moment in life trajectories, students are part of a broader generational framework in which they dialogue with other -non-student- youths, according to their identifications, interests, codes, forms of expression, production and circulation of culture (García Canclini, 2004).

Regarding the conditioning factors of the current educational experience, following Saraví (2015), we start from the assumption that university entrance takes place within the framework of a relational system of reciprocal exclusions and unequal inclusions. In the case of the most disadvantaged groups, inclusion in the higher education system is the result of an accumulation of disadvantages in educational and social conditions.

Likewise, it is proposed, with Dubet (2005), that the subjects are constituted as university students during their time at university and that it is, in this space, where trajectories with diversified and unequal lifestyles related to the groups to which they belong, converge. It is to be being in the university present, as in educational practices and daily rituals, where students appropriate the academic habitus (Ezcurra, 2012).

3 Methods

A survey was designed to be aimed at first-year university students with the intention of surveying key aspects of their previous school trajectories, cultural practices and consumption, and experiences of recent university entry. The dimensions of the survey are as follows: i) Socio-economic status, ii) Educational trajectory, iii) Appropriation and daily use of technologies, iv) Digital cultural practices and uses, v) Choices about university and career entry, vi) Student experience in the pandemic, vii) Emotions, expectations and concerns. This survey was applied for the first time in 2022 to first-year students of all degree courses at the National University of Quilmes, and for this purpose a representative sample was constructed based on the identification of commissions (courses) from the following dimensions: degree course, geographical location where they are studying, and time band of study. The last part of the questionnaire included an open space for students who wished to make comments and/or leave their data for an interview. A purposive sample was thus constructed for the longitudinal follow-up of cases.

4 Results

Although the research is currently in the systematization phase, in the first approach it was observed that a significant percentage of entering students are over 25 years of age and that the age ranges vary considerably according to the degree courses chosen. Likewise, the interruption of the theoretical trajectory in the passage between leaving secondary school and entrance of university was observed. Inequality was observed in the percentage of students who have access to social programmes (scholarships, subsidies, etc.) to continue their studies.

In reference to the uses and appropriations of technological devices and the system of technological devices of the entering students, there were generational articulations and coincidences in the massive use of mobile phones, in the use of PCs or notebooks to carry out activities, and in the centrality of the mobile phone during the pandemic. It was also observed that most of the students mentioned having watched a series on a digital platform (Netflix, mainly) and listening to music - of different types, predominantly rock music - very often or always.

In response to the enquiry about the emotions with which the students identified themselves at that moment regarding their student experience, they were able to choose one from a set of options, the majority responded "tired" and "hopeful", followed by "satisfied", "proud", "excited" and, to a lesser extent, "disappointed", "scared", "worried". The latter implied the consideration of a qualitative approach to understand the complex relationship between emotions, expectations and student status (Reguillo, 2010; Brachi and Gabbai, 2013)

5 Discussion

The finding with regard to the age range of the entrants entailed a resignification of the understanding attributed to student experience, recovering the social approaches that deal with youth from the perspective of transitions (Casal et al., 2011 Langa Rosado, 2005) and, in turn, the consideration of intragenerational and intergenerational relations as part of the student experience, taking into account the differences that arise according to the careers and fields of training.

In the same vein, the finding of non-linear trajectories is consistent with the insistence on attending to the real trajectories of students in the framework of their biographies and transitions, considering that the interval, suspension and temporary interruption of studies are part of the student condition (Marzioni, Pérez and Schneider, 2018).

6 Conclusions

The research is currently underway, in a stage of analytical work on the data collected in the survey conducted in 2022, and in the process of longitudinal, qualitative follow up of purposively selected cases.

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