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FIELD WORK REPORT

Youth's Perspective about Critical Thinking and development in Nicaragua's higher education: Is there space inside universities for a pedagogy towards social justice?

Research Paper Summary

My research paper is concerned with youth, education and development. It starts by problematizing how in a globalized world, shaped by capitalist power relations, education has been increasingly conceived as an investment with a rate of return, where youth are commonly framed as passive actors who just need to gain skills and knowledge to “become” future actors of development. This framing of education as a “capital good” instead of a “public good” has been changing the relevance of higher education to open up critical thinking spaces to bring students closer with the main social, political economic and cultural needs of the country. In the Nicaraguan context, this has been accentuated by a radical change regarding the role of the state, where the Sandinista government which was once claiming in the 1980s for autonomy at the university and was against neoliberal development models is now perceived by students as the main obstacle toward a more critical education reducing universities' autonomy and imposing their neoliberal vision of development without space for contestation.

Drawing on a comparative example of one public and one private university, this paper analyzes student's perception on how the space for critical thinking about development has been fluctuating inside these two universities. Some of the main findings illustrate an important historical shift about the role of public and private universities in Nicaragua where public universities have been reducing their spaces to foster a critical pedagogy among students and are reproducing a neoliberal “banking” education shrinking the space to contest hegemonic discourses about development.

Nevertheless, this paper also reveals how informal education plays a fundamental role on fostering a critical consciousness and resistance among students by unpacking inequalities and oppressions hidden under development, progress and modernity discourses that universities are not addressing.

SPD fund

In June 2016 the Social Policy Fund gave me the opportunity to come back to my home country to be able to do my fieldwork for my Research Paper. I spent one and a half month collecting data from two universities -public and private - in the capital of Nicaragua, Managua. I interviewed 20 young students; 10 at *Universidad Centro Americana* and 10 from *Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Nicaragua*.

The fund allowed me to engage on an interpretative research which is conceived as an ongoing learning process with flexibility and openness for new choices. Under interpretative research reality is not external to the researcher but shaped by human values that shape the understanding of reality materially and symbolically. The “subject “which in this particular case were students from both universities, are considered to be multiple, heterogeneous embodied, gendered, racialized and produced through a specific history. Their narratives were the most important part of my Research Paper and the SP fund made possible my desire of making young student’s voices count in a society where adultism predominates.

Furthermore, being physically in Nicaragua was fundamental to me since I had learned more about the context where the study took place observing the social dynamic at the university and performing secondary interviews to key academic staff inside both universities.

Relation to the Major and Specialization

My motivation for doing this research paper started since I wanted to understand better the role of the universities to foster social justice inside my country. I wanted to analyze if they are fostering or constraining contested visions toward development and explore if there was any connection between socio political or economic events in Nicaragua’s development and the shrinking or expanding of critical thinking space inside universities. I found that my major opened my mind to have a more critical perspective on development and education and to unpack different forms of oppression and exclusion that may result as intended or unintended consequences of different social policies.

Furthermore, the specialization I did on “Children and Youth “was key to understand more the way youth is frame at international and national level problematizing how this frames may be reducing students active citizenship and agency.



Authors photo at UNAN



