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A participatory research on the role of the school as an agent for reflection and social change

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Abstract

The neighbourhood with its own history, identity, traditions, is a very important site for the personality development since early childhood. Daily living space is also the place where it is possible to observe the social conflicts, the distance between international aspirations of a global city and the problems related to poverty, lack of work, the precariousness of housing, the consumption and dealing of drugs and finally the presence of social groups with different geographical, social and cultural backgrounds. By focusing on educational issues this article aims to analyze how the teachers in the classrooms develop the daily activities about the process of teaching and learning in a vulnerable social space and in a context where the school is at the same time an oasis and a ghetto.

Keywords: Gentrification, education, participatory research.

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1. Introduction

It is common in the speeches on the great town planning and architectural projects to hear about the reconversion of the urban spaces with the purpose to regenerate the economic activities and to satisfy the requests of spaces for the consumption and consumer demand (Lopez & Rodriguez, 2011).

The historical centers are an object for the building speculation and for the proliferation of mega architectural complexes destined to offices, commercial centers, gym and luxury habitations, but even to allow an expansion of the touristic activities with the selling of second residences: commercial and touristic gentrification (Janoschka, Sequera & Salinas, 2014).

The plans of reconversion proposed by the local authorities involve:

- The privatization of the public spaces and the unbalanced and speculative dialogue between public and private (Fraser, 2007).
- The dismemberment of the local social body without bearing in mind the specificities of these urban contexts and their being alive and complex organisms (Prytherch & Maiques, 2009).
- The displacement of people. The process of gentrification is linked with the urban neoliberal model which restricts the possibility for poor people or at risk of social exclusion to re-appropriate the public space for the social and economic regeneration. (del Romero & Trudelle, 2011).

In this article, we explore the consequences after the approval of the PEPRI Plan of Reform and Internal Protection of 1998 in the district of the Cabanyal in the city of Valencia – Spain.

The situation in the neighborhood is symptomatic of a town planning politics that imposes social inequality and takes advantage of the specificity of the urban context.

Through an ethnographic study lasting one year (September 2014-July 2015) in a public school in the Cabanyal, the data picked up with the participant observation, the interviews, and the document analysis, have put in evidence a very complex situation characterized by a strong social conflict and segregation.

In order to deal with the transformations in the district and the modifications of the student body, the school has replied with a project of didactic of the territory.

The project aimed at examining the context of life and the territory, knowing different communities that live in the neighborhood and at last documenting the present situation that distresses the Cabanyal.

This article makes it visible that, without an accurate political and at the same time pedagogical reflection on the causes and the processes that have determined the transformation of the district and that keep on changing it, every education project risks being isolated initiative.

In the Cabanyal the roads were a place of socialization, exchange and meeting, now the roads are uninhabited, dangerous and a disfigured space (Santamarina, 2009).

In the first part of the article, we analyze the actual situation of the area, the modification of the social body, the pervasive processes of marginalization and exclusion.

In the second part, we reflect on the challenges and opportunities to engage into a critical discussion regarding the school and his relation with the contexts of life.

The material used in this article, comes from a fieldwork for a doctorate thesis in course.

2. The Field of Research

Cabanyal is the name of a historical fisherman's settlement on the coast of Valencia's city, Spain.

The name Cabanyal derives from *cabañas* the ancient houses done from clay, straw and canes, materials that the residents could find in this zone and easily workable.

The huts needed a constant maintenance above all, because of the rain and the dampness. The walls had to be painted white at least once a year and the covering of the straw roofs needed constant supervision (Terol, 2014).

From 1837 to 1897, the Cabanyal has remained an independent municipality, and then the City Council of Valencia decreed the annexation of it in spite of the protests of the population.

With the forced annexation, even the architecture of the district starts to be modified, after some fires that destroyed part of the territory, the following orders will forbid the construction of new huts, because straw and canes were highly flammable materials. It begins a process of urban renewal and of reform of the habitations.

The fishermen began to cover the fronts of the buildings with ceramics bricks, to forestall the dampness and to protect the wall against the saline wind and the rain. Each house began to have his colors above the shadings of the green and the blue and each corner was adorned with fragments of art and details; roses and sparrows, cones and garlands, geometric arabesques. A style of popular modernism (Art Nouveau) that has characterized the neighborhood and that has conferred singularity to the houses.

In May 1993, the Cabanyal was declared an Asset of Cultural Interest (BIC). Only five years later, on July 24 1998, the Popular Party that governed the city approves the Special Plan for Interior Reform (PEPRI).

The urbanistic plan implied the prolongation of the Blasco Ibañez Avenue through the district of the Cabanyal up to the sea, the destruction of 1651 houses and finally the displacement of 1200 families.

A project that had some supporters but also many opponents of the civil society who wanted to protect this piece of Mediterranean and popular history.

The same Ministry of the Spanish Culture, in January of 2010 ordered the immediate block of the Plan PEPRI, because it was considering a process against the artistic property of the historic district. The decision had been taken in consequence of the sentence of the Supreme Court in May 2009.

The approval of the PEPRI was justified by the local politicians as a measure to protect the historic district and to improve the connections with the rest of the city. Two great-declared objectives of the Plan were:

- The regeneration of the Cabanyal and the adjacent areas near to the coast.
- The historical claim of connecting through the Blasco Ibañez Avenue the residential and university zone of the city of Valencia to the sea.

At the same time to the approval of the Special Plan for Interior Reform (PEPRI) the residents began a big mobilization around the movement *Salvem el Cabanyal* (Let's save the Cabanayl) that started a process of civic resistance and defense of the neighborhood against the speculative development.

The population with tenacity and quite little economic availability has demonstrated in these years, that there are other practicable ways against the destruction of the Cabanyal. The main objective of the judicial and administrative initiatives was to protect the territory from the external threat.

The population, as a well-organized community, engaged in a critical resistance characterized by imagination and creativity with high symbolic value. One of the projects elaborated by the platform is

the workshop Portes Obertes, Open Doors, in which the residents open their houses to the whole city to show artworks of the artists involved into the struggle of Cabanyal.

They even opened a digital archive, Cabanyal Archivio Vivo. It is a site to publicise aims to raise awareness about the exclusionary and oppressing forces of neoliberal governance of the city. Since the adoption of the PEPRI and during the years of the contrast between the local Council and the resistance from the citizens, (1998-2015) the pattern of human relationships has been destroyed.

Many people have left their houses, according to the data of the Office of Statistics of the city of Valencia today living in the Cabanyal are a total of 20.544 people with a decrease of about 7 % of 1991 (22. 125 inhabitants).

Some houses have been knocked down, destroying the distinctive urban pattern of the area and the particular architectural style, others houses have been occupied by gipsy families from Spain and Romania.

The conditions of life have visibly got worse: the degradation, the state of neglect, the dirt, the carelessness from the public authorities and the drug trafficking, have completely transformed the ancient district.

3. The school

The ethnographic research (from September 2014 to July 2015) has taken place in a public school of the Cabanyal. The school hosts children of pre-primary (three classes of 75 kids) and primary school (eleven classes for a total of 275 pupils).

It is a monumental yellow building close to the sea, built in one of the areas most affected with the degradation a few metres away from the big structure of the Clot: a block of popular houses built in the 50s for the workers of the port and at present occupied by 450 families of Spanish and Romanian gipsy.

Most of the families supplement their small incomes by picking up the waste from the roads. All day long, you can see young boys with their bicycles that sort and clean up much of the rubbish around the touristic places and middle class suburbs of the city. The rubbish is bound for secondary market where it can be sold.

Rubbish is an important node of a secondary economy that generates incomes for those poor families but it is even a huge problem, because it is accumulated in the common spaces of the occupied buildings in the neighborhood.

In July 2015, after the elections of the new mayor of the city and the application of the Plan for the Cleaning of the Cabanyal it has picked up 12.300 Kg of waste.

The school has tried in these years to decline in practical sense the possibilities of welcome for all the children that live in the Cabanyal, in spite of the economic difficulties, the degradation of the area, the situation of social segregation and the marginalization.

There is a general understanding among the interviewed that there has been a change since the adoption of the Plan PEPRI, the pattern of the human relationship has been destroyed. Today the social network community of the Cabanyal is very eclectic but even a place of social conflict between the Spanish people that have been living in the neighborhood since they were born, the big community of Spanish gipsy, the group of Roman people and other groups of immigrants.

The headmaster of the school reported that:

The Plan has induced conflicts and consequences even in the school body, the gipsy and the Romanian kids go to the public school while the Spanish kids, *los payos*, go to the private schools even ones in a different neighbourhood. They live in the same street but they do not meet each other in the schools. There is a complete separation and a frontier that does not allow the integration.

The rapid changes, deteriorating and increased complexity of the neighborhood, presents new challenges and new demands at the local education system.

The school is a place that hosts all the kids in their diversity, but there is still a lack of availability of equal opportunities for individuals because of family, social and economic circumstances.

In this situation, despite the Spanish law (Ley Organica de Educacion 3 may 2006) which says to distribute the cases with special educational needs in all the schools supported with public financing, the public school of the Cabanyal is emerging as a ghetto, with a large number of segregated kids and despairing cases of poverty and social exclusion.

The confrontation between the educational institution and the local politicians is important for many people as a way to overtake the situation of the school as a ghetto. In fact the school interested by this research is definite the poorest of the district, with low expectation levels for the pupils.

The paradox is that the school is also an oasis for the children, not only because it is a place of socialization and instruction, but also because it is a site of the rights for the poorest. In the school's canteen, the children can eat at least a hot meal every day, in the classrooms they can find a warm and comfortable place where to play and somebody that looks after them.

A teacher reported that:

In my classroom, there are 18 children and the majority only eat in the school because they receive an eating allowance every year. They live in the Cabanyal, in overcrowded houses without electricity, water, and gas. They live in the street most of the time. Many of them do not speak Spanish. The children do not have a routine of anything; of hygiene, of eating, of sitting down, some of them have never used a spoon and they often eat a sandwich in the street. The first work that is done when the kids begin the school is to speak about the basic hygienic habits; washing hands with soap before eating or after going to the toilet, washing the body, cleaning the teeth, changing into clean clothes.

This ambivalence between a school as a ghetto and a school as an oasis is the core of the reflection in this article. The aim is to discuss the demand of a pedagogical and political analysis of the context in which the school is situated. We reflect on the opportunities and challenges that emerge as we think the educational institution as a field of critical reflection and revision of the curriculum while the concepts of identity, space and community are the base and the context of the entire process of teaching – learning.

4. The project “Fa Molts anys al Cabanyal”

In the year 2014-2015, the school started a project called *Fa Molts anys al Cabanyal*. In the intentions of the teachers, the project had to promote the knowledge and the respect of the cultural differences of the territory, to develop the knowledge of the history, geography, and traditions of the neighbourhood where the children and their families live. The project was also a strategy to throw again the image of the school that was opening to the community, trying to reconcile the diversified demands of the pupils and of their families with the identity of the context of life.

This is the description in the words of one teacher, who has her family living in the area:

The situation affecting the Cabanyal worsened significantly during the last fifteen years, which led to a steep increase in the number of people living in vulnerable conditions. In one hand, we live a lack of democratic involvement of citizen in the management and politics of the use of the territory, in the other hand the local politicians allow certain sectors of the population to live in deprived socio-economic situations. Every year I think of how can I present to the children the place where they live, and where I lived when I was small. My pupils are gypsies, immigrants; there is not *payos* in the classroom, they live in the Cabanyal but they did not know this place before the degradation.

The project began with a huge research of news, maps, photos, legends about the Cabanyal.

The didactic activity contained the following topics:

- First section about the typical architecture of the area: low houses, reticular pattern with streets parallel to the sea and the alleys that lead to it with popular modernist architecture.
- Second section about the art of fishing with the oxen that for hundreds of years have been the fundamental activity for all inhabitants of the place.
- Third section on the typical kitchen of the territory.

The project continued with the exploration of different social groups: autochthonous and migrant communities. According to the data of the Office of Statistics of the city Valencia in the year 2015, about 14, 7% of the people who live in the Cabanyal are foreign-born.

Fundamental was the narrative frame that was holding together the different parts of the project; the history about a child named Salvoret nephew of a fisherman, who lives in the Cabanyal and day by day knows the area where he lives with his family.

At the end of the project (May 2015) the teachers, the headmaster, and the researcher, started a broad debate that helps us to assess and critically reflect on the most important aspects and the limits of the didactical intervention.

Everybody reported the facts and the events of his experience; we analyze and consider the future impact of our work, on the kids and on the community. We started a reflection on the use of the language and the social dimension of the meanings, because the language used for describing a determinate reality can be itself a hegemonic expression and have social consequences.

Beyond our analysis, our research confirmed that without a deep reflection on the relation between curriculum, identity, community and territory, the projects can fall on the partitions of categories of opposite mark: we-they, past-present, autochthonous - migrant, school ghetto - school oasis. Those aspects cannot be given for granted if we do not want to fall on the simplification and on the reduction of the complexity.

5. Design for Change

The sharing of the experiences and the individual and collective analysis has let make emerging new research questions; about the school as a place for the reflection on the factors that are at the root of the condition of marginalization and social conflict, and the school as an agent that promote the empowerment of the community (Guajardo, Guajardo & Casaperalta, 2008).

As a group that was deeply involved in local dynamics we started to consider the challenges and opportunities to engage in a process of participatory action research, developing designed structures that facilitate the knowledge of the contest of life, a local empowerment and its avocation of a social change.

Our commitment is to design a system linked with the community: a school as an open space that promotes authentic praxis that developing in the kids a sense of purpose as individuals that critically reflective about their community (Shor & Freire, 1987).

In this case, the personal histories and narrative could generate power, activating a run of political and pedagogical reflection important for the whole community (Giroux, 1999).

In the project, *Fa Molts anys al Cabanyal*, all the material had been picked on the Internet or through the memories of the people closed to the teachers, the friends, the relatives. In this second phase of the project, we want to pick up the histories lived directly by kids of the primary and secondary school, who live with their families in the Cabanyal.

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The youths are interviewed and at the same time they interview the other people of the neighbourhood, they tell their histories of life and at the same time they listen to histories of life; a process of construction of the knowledge on their own life context.

The collected histories and narratives will be dealt like a luggage of data, theories and methods, which can be used for the transformation of the didactic practices and the reflection on the curriculum in the school and they will be presented to a group formed by teachers, parents, representing the different communities and local politicians.

We adopt a participatory approach that is people-centered, is supporting empowerment and is based on the relation between theory and praxis. We work closely with non-academic actors that are directly involved in the research process.

The Cabanyal is today a center of marginality, vulnerable communities and social conflict. Our assumption is that the school can be a site for the pedagogical and political reflection on the connection between territory, identity and community and a space of construction of the knowledge and social change against the forces that perpetuate the status quo of the economic and cultural impoverishment. The participatory research and the school are together an opportunity to reflect and contrast the neoliberal process of the gentrification in all his forms.

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