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"That world is not for me":

Constructing a personal sense of opposition against school obligations

Summary

This study contributes to the contemporary discussion on school drop-out. Based on ethnographic materials I analyze the life contexts of working-class families in Mexico. Two case-stories from these materials on school drop-outs are presented and analyzed here. These two young people constructed narrative self-understandings and orientations about their lives and school drop-out in which they describe their experiences of school as a way to participate in "multiple worlds" across different social contexts in search of more rewarding life options than school. Confronted with collective cultural meanings about school, children and teenagers are able to construct a personal sense legitimating or resisting these collective meanings. This is occurring in a situation where important changes are taking place across generations concerning the meaning of school resulting from historical, economical and national changes and from the ways in which people use and enact collective cultural meanings about school. I argue for a reevaluation of the forms of participation of working class families and children in school. And I conclude that we need to replace the predominant disconnected understanding of the value of school learning and school knowledge with an understanding of the meaning of school in children's and teenagers' participation across different contexts with different relations to others.

Introduction

In the current discussion on the personal importance of school some questions have not been addressed explicitly, such as "Why and for what purpose does someone go to school?" and "How far should she study?" Different explanatory levels have been generated concerning these questions: at a general level, e.g. educational policies, levels of schooling and academic performance are pointed out as indicators of a country's degree of socio-economic development (García & Suárez, 1996). More specific research was carried out during the second half of the twentieth century concerning issues such as group status and culture (ethnic group, gender, race) as conditions that affect school performance (Delgado-Gaitán 1994a; Gibson 1982; Hemmings 1996; Holland & Eisenhart 1990; Ogbu 1982, 1990; Pieke 1991), working-class culture from which norms of orientation and school use emerge (Willis 1977; Biggart & Furlong 1996; Muñoz 1996), about learning favorable or unsuccessful educational practices (Fernández 1986; Lichtenstein 1993; Mehan 1986;

Perrenoud 1990; López et al. 1984, 1988), about the impact of family practices concerning school on the reproduction or breakdown of a school tradition in each family (Connell et al 1982; Schneider & Lee 1990; Suárez-Orozco 1987), and finally about the influence of friendship groups on academic performance (Rymes 1995). In this body of research there were several diverse topics of interest, such as, school failure, processes of adaptation and assimilation to school culture, uses of school, processes of individualization in school trajectories, and so on. Traditional research attributed the responsibility for school failure to the children's own disabilities (see CRESAS 1982), but more recent analyses locate the person in particular socio-historical contexts and discuss the diverse socio-cultural relations and practices involved in the way persons relate to school.

Two important analytic perspectives which have grown out of this research so far allow us to locate the relations of persons to school. The first argues that in each particular historical-social context specific practices and meanings define someone as an "educated person" or enable a person to consider how many years to stay in school (Levinson & Holland 1996). The second perspective notes that each person's school trajectory is unique. This is so because all persons have their own experiences in school which they synthesize with elements from the social context they live in (collective meanings about school, its effects on the material conditions of life and students' educational practices, etc.) and with subjective aspects constructed over time (ways of interpreting meanings, modes of reacting to school discipline, skills for using available material resources, etc.) (Charlot et al 1992; Rochex 1989). A main problem to be discussed concerns the relation between the person and her environment, in this case, between the collective culture with certain shared meanings,

the social norms and everyday life practices concerning school, and the personal culture, symbols, practices and objects which every person constructs during the course of her school trajectory.[1]

A further problem concerns what we focus on when we ask why a person goes to school: Do we focus on the school itself? On the family? On friends? On labor opportunities? The personal sense attributed to school emanates from the person's life experiences in which school is but one context of a person's social practice and not isolated from the other contexts she participates in. Persons participate in more than one social context, and the personal meaning of each context depends on its relationships with other contexts in the structure of that person's social practice (Dreier 1999; Hojholt 1997). In constructing a personal culture, an individual must weigh, relate, balance, and contrast her participation and concerns across these different contexts.

In Mexico research on school phenomena from a cultural perspective is scarce and mostly concerned with analyzing the influence of socio-economic inequalities on gaining access to and remaining in school. This socio-economic dimension is important, but it is also necessary to know a person's meanings and values about school and the nature of their practical personal involvement in it. In my research I analyze how people discursively construct the value of school and their descriptions of their participation in it. I also attempt to identify how persons establish and elaborate relationships between interdependent social contexts in their personal narratives. I adopt a perspective of analysis similar to Phelan et al (1991) who argue that in

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1 The concepts of "collective culture" and "personal culture" are taken from Valsiner (1997). In order to analyze the narratively constructed meanings attributed to school I use the concepts of "personal sense" and "personal culture" as synonyms.

order to explain school dropout it is necessary to go beyond an analysis which only considers isolated traits like gender, race, or social class and instead talk about the "multiple worlds" students participate in every day. I also take into consideration the personal interpretations of the relationship between the school and other social contexts and how persons identify the important influences in their lives and in their decision to drop out of school. According to my interpretation, a person uses the shared meanings about education in a collective culture to construe a particular personal sense which becomes part of that person's particular experience.

In this paper I analyze the life stories of two young adults, Carlos and Yasenin who quit school as teenagers. First, I briefly consider why I chose to work with life stories. Then, I describe some aspects of the social contexts in which these two young persons' working class families live in order to demonstrate the multiple worlds they participate in. After that, I analyze the life stories of Carlos and Yasenin who told me why they construed a personal sense which led them to reject school. And finally, I return to the central idea that the experience of school is construed across social contexts or multiple worlds in an interplay between the elements of collective culture and personal sense which individual persons handle actively in their stories.

The life story in the analysis of the experience of school

A life story is a subjective interpretative reconstruction based on a person's past experiences. Several factors interact in this reconstruction: the person's abilities to tell her life according to the discursive practices in the social context she lives in; the memory filters which make her remember some things and not others; her conscious selection to tell some aspects of her life and not others; and even a joint construction of a story in which the selection of memories may be guided by the dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewed. (Bertaux 1988; Bruner 1996; Middleton 1997). When persons participate in social contexts, they appropriate available discursive structures in order to interpret their experiences over time. But every person assimilates the words and discourses of others selectively in constructing stories of their own life (Tappan, 1991), and, as noted by Wertsch (1998), narratives are cultural artifacts persons use to establish a mediated relation between their own experiences and the social world. Narratives are collective because they contain a set of meanings and representations which are comprehensible to many individuals, but persons may use them in a unique way to sketch their experiences as being unique or to understand their social reality. Wertsch (1998) exemplifies this by saying that the history of national heroes, or the narration of national emblems, are taught in schools, and children get to know them and repeat them in a process of appropriation. Yet, this process is not necessarily a legitimization because students may believe that those stories have no value or relationship to their own identities as persons. This is a common phenomenon in the regulation of school discipline in as much as many students have read these stories or know them, but do not accept them as a guide for their own conduct. The values of school and the specifications of how to participate in it, are transmitted to children and teenagers through socializing stories with specific goals, but children use them in different ways and accept them or reject them through their experiences as students.

There are two reasons why I chose to work with life stories. First, it is difficult to carry out longitudinal studies which grant us

access to individuals' personal experiences of school at different moments in their lives. Second, in a life story a person is able to describe aspects of her participation in the different social contexts in which her life passes, including the school, and the relationships she has established between them. In doing so, a person must necessarily use collective meanings to make sense of the life she has led and, in particular, to configure a personal sense about the value of school in her particular experiences.

About this study
I carried out ethnographic work in a community of families in which the father or mother are retired from or work for Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico (FNM), the Mexican railway company. The aim was to detect elements of working class culture and its relationship to the parents' expectations about their children's schooling. I visited the homes of fourteen families to obtain the life stories of the parents and one of the children in every case. I knew several of the social contexts they participate in, such as: the urban complex where these families live, their homes, and the gardens and parking zones their children and teenagers frequent to play and chat. Near the urban complex there is a park, mobile markets, schools (kindergarten, elementary school, secondary school, technical junior high school), medical centers and a community center for parties. I was also able to identify and analyze some of the practices of socialization in the families, schools, peer groups, and romantic relationships between teenagers. It is not possible to present much of the information I have in this paper. I shall, therefore, only try to ground the stories of Carlos and Yasenin in relation to some of the collective meanings in those social contexts concerning the importance of school and what it means to be a valuable person.

Elements of the collective culture about school in a community of "railway families"
The parents in this community had a long working career characterized by employment stability and rising into higher positions (in general not beyond the level of a well-qualified worker and, in a smaller proportion, as clerical staff). In their life stories, these parents said that they were able to finish no more than elementary school because they came from poor families and had to work as teenagers to support their parents. They emphasized that when they were children, there was no strong interest in education in their families, and they saw that as something negative in their lives. They construed an image of their childhood and teenage lives as persons being determined by family circumstances with no possibility to choose whether they wanted to continue to study or not. In these parents' stories there is also a strong link between the importance of their own job and their support for their children's higher levels of schooling. A common phrase was: "It is my greatest pride that my job enabled me to give my children everything." They thus linked their identity as workers with their family and their children's socialization. A major educational expansion took place in Mexico during the nineteen seventies, and many children gained an opportunity to stay in school for more years. Secondary school became compulsory in 1993 when the expectation of a higher level of scholarship had become common in the Mexican population. In their life stories these parents used the current criteria about what it means to be an "educated person" to assess their past, and, at the same time, they strengthened their belief that education is the key to facing the economic crisis in Mexico since 1980. In that sense, parents integrated collective meanings about the value of schooling with a more particular

personal sense derived from their situation as railroad workers which allowed them to support their children economically in school for a larger number of years.

In these families a semiotic organization around the concept of "becoming somebody" is expressed in the socialization of their children with values such as individual responsibility, being prepared to face economic crisis, supporting their families in the future, and having a better life than their parents. Regarding the kind of jobs these parents expect their children to obtain (middle management and specialized staff), they noticed that the labor market demands a senior high school education as a minimum. These parents' stakes are focused on providing their children with material conditions such as buying school tools and uniforms, looking for the right school, etc., and a strong tendency to use moralizing stories ("consejos") with a cultural dimension which integrates emotional empathy, compassion, and family expectations (Delgado-Gaitan 1994b). For instance, a father tells his children: "I tell my child to study so that he won't go through what I did." In general, these parents do not help their children to do their homework or prepare for an examination since they do not believe this to be their obligation but that the children must be responsible and do their part of the deal.

These parents believe that their seventeen or eighteen year old children are not sufficiently grown up to work. They insist that their children must continue to study, and if the children quit school, the parents either search for another school for them or for some work oriented training. If, finally, a child decides to drop out of school, the parents use the expression, "The one who wants to, studies, and the one who doesn't want to, just doesn't", as an explanatory resource which integrates the idea of having provided for the appropriate conditions to study with

the perception of a lack of will in their children that makes them leave school. When the parents tell their children that they will not have to work, the parents open spaces in time for their children to select among an array of educational choices while they resign to the will of those children who do not want to continue studying. The parents find themselves actively combining parental support with promoting and accepting their children's individuality.

The family works in order to be able to encourage the children's education. However, the family is not the only social context in which the children participate, learn modes of action, are influenced or make choices. The children in these families go to school as a part of their everyday life, but they also help to clean the house, do their homework, and hang around with friends living in the same neighborhood. Usually children and teenagers, boys as well as girls, spend several hours outside home with their friends. Their parents see this as acceptable and necessary because "children get bored at home". The pastimes of young people include organizing parties, listening to tropical music, watching television, playing video games, practicing (amateur) soccer and basketball in the parking lots of the neighborhood and chatting with their friends. Affairs with a boyfriend or girlfriend are very important for teenagers around eleven or twelve years of age and sometimes end in premature pregnancies. Teenagers may also have formal and informal jobs from an early age on (approximately the age of thirteen), for example as packers in supermarkets, grocery and stationery store clerks, in mobile markets and in helping neighbors dispose of their garbage. For these young people the value of work is associated with the possibility of buying sport wear, trainers and shoes of well-known brands which their parents say they cannot afford.

In the schools I visited, elementary and secondary school teachers share a negative vision of the railway families. They think that the children from these families are problem children, bad students, and that their parents do not help them to study nor take care to discipline them. At the same time, these schools have major deficiencies in their own systems of pedagogy and in their organization of discipline. Punishments, low grades and expulsion are common recourses in dealing with "bad students". The teachers' negative representations of the children from railway families prevent them from noting the examples of good students (whom I do not analyze in this paper) who continue to study in high school or even at a major university. Every day these children and teenagers participate in the different social contexts previously mentioned. They learn to establish relationships between those contexts, to compare the different options of participation, to use the available resources and to look for places where they are recognized as valuable people or acquire different kinds of skills. Their personal sense of school begins to unfold with their appropriation of the representations adults transmit to children, and it is transformed as every child or teenager experiments in a practical way with what it means to be in school.

The stories of Carlos and Yasenin

When I carried out this study, Carlos was twenty-one and Yasenin twenty-two years old. Carlos is the son of a divorced couple and always lived with his mother. The mother studied dentistry at a university but only worked as a dentist for a couple of years. She worked as an office clerk for twenty-five years in FNM and is now retired. Carlos' father also worked for the FNM but only for a short time

and later had other kinds of jobs. Carlos dropped out of secondary school and began to have informal jobs. At the age of 18 he joined an adult school and got his secondary school certificate. His mother forced him to work for the FNM where he was trained to become an electrician, and he liked his job though he would like to have other job options in the future.

Yasenin was adopted by her mother's husband when she was one year old. Her mother was a janitor in a factory, and her adoptive father was a train conductor at FNM. When Yasenin dropped out of secondary school, she then entered a secretarial school because her mother had insisted upon it. She attended that school for two years, then left it too and worked in several places as a clerk. Later she was trained as a hairdresser and worked in a beauty parlor until she got married. She is now a housewife and has a baby.

I cannot go into all the aspects of their lives as told to me by Carlos and Yasenin. Analyzing life narratives implies that the researcher does some re-construction and re-ordering, departing from the tape transcripts until what is the substance of analysis is rescued (King 1991; Magrassi & Rocca 1980; Fraser 1990). My interest is to understand the sense of school for these young people. For that purpose I shall concentrate on those moments in their narratives where Carlos and Yasenin describe their modes of participation in school and elaborate the personal perspective from which they resist the value of education as an obligation.

Characteristics of their narratives

Carlos' and Yasenin's narratives are neither linear nor homogeneous, but mix times and topics. Concerning their own development they point out changes from one stage to another and from childhood to adolescence with the change from elementary school to junior high-school as a central reference. In

general, they say very little about what they have learned during their school trajectory because, as they say, they do not remember things, and they hardly speak at all concerning academic topics. By contrast, they go into much more detail when they speak of events that had to do with their emotional relations, such as conflicts with teachers, family problems which affected them, their interpersonal relations, and their social relations with friends.

The personal sense in the organization of the school narrative

The following four examples from these narratives allow us to delineate the kind of relationships and attitudes Carlos and Yasenin had with school:

A. Restricted location.[2] For Carlos and Yasenin school was an obligation. Carlos says:

"About why I go to school? Well, maybe it was still an obligation to keep on studying. I mean, seeing something in it, a future like that for me, boy no! It didn't keep on being an obligation. Maybe it was a way of doing something, you see? While something happens in your life."

Yasenin also relates:

"Well, I used to ask my mother what I was studying for, and she used to tell me: 'It's just that I don't want you to be working in a factory just the way I am'. Boy, it's all right. And I go there because of an obligation and not because I would like to."

2 I want to use the concept of "restricted location" based on Valsiner's concept of "bounded indeterminacy of development" where he states that "Children's development is socially guided through constraint structures that empower children to explore novel ways of acting and thinking, as they relate to the constraint structures in different ways. First, he or she can accept the limiting role these constraints play in the child's relationship with the environment. Second, he or she can act upon the given constraint structure with the aim of modifying it, transforming it into another form. Dependent on circumstances, such efforts may, or need not, succeed"(1989:8).

In these extracts Carlos and Yasenin locate themselves as being obliged to go to school, and their expressions of discomfort show their degree of dislike of being obligated to do so. I call this restricted location since they both let us see that they had to be in school, but it is not a constrained location in an absolute or static manner. In their narratives they mention a temporary dimension: "while something happens in your life" or "because I don't want you to be working in a factory", which refers to their condition of students-children and implies that they must not yet work or that they must wait to do other adult things. This location and temporary dimension allows us to get an idea of the elements of the collective culture in which school seems to be a defining space in children's circumstances, and the voice of Yasenin's mother giving advise shows her expectation of overcoming her own working situation. Besides, it allows us to realize how they locate themselves in relation to what they had to do: going to school but without pleasure.

B. Configuring a personal sense regarding school. Their restricted location at school was no absolutely determining condition for their performance. Over time Carlos and Yasenin develop their own construction of their participation in school. As they themselves say, there were moments when they did "try harder" ("le echaban ganas") in school in order to reach certain objectives. In elementary school, Carlos was moved to another school where he had to improve his grades if he wanted to be in the same school as his sister. By then he thought:

"My sister had always been my back-up, and she was sent to another school. I remember I tried even harder (le echaba muchas ganas), I tried a lot harder in order to be in that school with my sister, to get into the other school."

Yasenin says:

"My mother would always realize from my grades (that I didn't like school), and then she just told me 'If you don't do your best (te apuras), The Three Wise Men won't bring you a gift', and I, well, I used to do my best (me apuraba), but then, boy, not any more."

"Echarle ganas" (try harder) and "apurarse" (do one's best) refer to strategic attitudes which Carlos and Yasenin applied in relation to their performance in school in order to produce an effect in another context. In Carlos' case the emotional closeness to his sister and in Yasenin's to obtain a present for an infant celebration. Nonetheless, these moments of trying harder were not common because they describe themselves in their narratives as restless (inquieto), trouble makers, and uninterested in school. Yasenin says:

"Every now and then I was at the principal's office because I used to misbehave, I used to start joking around, I didn't pay attention to the class, I used to be very absent-minded." And then when she was in junior high school: "Ugh, getting up early, coming to school, oh dear! And there were so many subjects that I said to my mother, 'Am I really going to study that much?'."

Carlos remembered the days when he went to junior high school:

"I used to have a friend, I can't remember his name, but I remember his last name was Mendez, and I used to hang around with this guy. And we never stopped messing around, him and me. We would always be playing ... We were requested to get a lab coat, tools for our workshop and 'No way! Us!' Who knows where we had left the things! I think that unconsciously we did this just to upset the teacher."

The way they characterize themselves in their narratives gives us an insight into the behavior expected of pupils in school: behaving correctly, paying attention, bringing materials, etc.. However, Carlos and Yasenin highlight the specific use they made of school as a place to have fun. This is reflected in their misbehavior and in their joy over

doing something different from what their teachers requested. Besides, we increasingly notice their discomfort and their indifference towards having to deal with school issues.

C. Adopting a stance and leaving school. Carlos and Yasenin narrate their trajectory as school children by referring to situations that had turned out to be problematic for them due to their tendency to "mess around" and not to live up to school. They both remembered that they were not stupid, that they had tried harder when they wanted to, and that they had managed to get good grades, but that their restlessness and their desire to do something else had a major impact on their performance. As concerns adolescence, they tend to point out emotional interpersonal relationships as being very important topics in their narratives. School is no longer just a place to have fun with their friends or where one is a problem child, but rather a place to find and build emotional relationships. Yasenin and Carlos both used to have a sweetheart in junior high school, and they recognize these interpersonal relationships and their adoption of a stance towards school as an important element in their decision to leave school. Yasenin says:

"I was thrown out of school because I was jumping over the wall when a teacher, the principal's assistant, pulled me by my foot saying 'Get down!', and I said 'No!' So, zip! I kicked her and went out. And since I was very messy ("relajienta") and always failing that subject, short hand and mathematics, the principal's assistant told me: 'Well, if you want to return to school you are going to start back in second grade'.[3] She was going to put me in my boyfriend's class, and I never got along well with his female friends. So I said 'No, I would rather leave'."

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3 The equivalence of 8th grade in the USA.

Yasenin explains that she kicked the teacher because she was messy showing us her location as a certain kind of student. Confronted with the condition for rejoining school, Yasenin balances it against the possible effect which being in the same class as her boyfriend and his female friends would have on her. As a result, she adopts a personal stance deciding that it is inconvenient for her and, therefore, leaves school.

Carlos establishes a similar connection. He narrates his attitude in a music lesson at a particular time in junior high school when they were rehearsing an anthem: "I was listening and, I don't know, I felt, 'What now? Now I'm here, then what? What does what I'm listening to have to do with me?'" This large indifference towards school subjects is contrasted with what they considered to be more meaningful aspects of his life:

> "Well, ... the one who was the love of my dreams, I mean, I don't want to blame her, but I missed school for her. Well, I didn't miss it, I let it go. It was for her that I started having problems and for her that I used to go to school... I used to start crying, and that was why I decided not to go to school."

In his narrative Carlos more emphatically than Yasenin points out his large indifference towards school subjects and identifies the impact of personal emotional relationships on him and on his decision to leave school. The school context is not homogeneous in the sense that the practices and meanings constructed in it are uniform. In their narratives Carlos and Yasenin let us see how, within the same physical space, they move from the context of school to the context of emotional personal relationships. As I have noted, at other times they tried harder at school learning in order to obtain good grades and produce effects in other contexts of social relationships, such as Carlos being close to his sister and Yasenin receiving a present. However, their movement can be reversed when their interpersonal emotional relationships affect them and make their continued presence in school even more troubled. In this reversed movement they go from the context of their emotional relationships to produce an effect in the school context: adopting a position that ends with the decision to leave school.

D. Self assessment. After trying to finish secondary school and again in an open school system and at the beginning of her secretarial course, Yasenin decided not to continue:

> "I used to tell my mother, 'It is just that this is not for me, mom, send me to another school where I can start working soon'. Or then I used to say, 'No, I just want to start working. Help me get in!'"

She had worked as a clerk in various jobs and was pleased to narrate that she used to feel very good about being a jewelry sales agent because she had had an aptitude for that kind of work, or being hairdresser because she learned the occupation fast. She assessed that she was able to help her husband economically, in spite of not having finished secondary school, because she could work as a hairdresser in her own house.

Before Carlos left school he used to have small manual jobs, such as helping a blacksmith, painting and gardening. About his decision to leave school he says:

> "I don't know, perhaps that world wasn't for me. I don't know... I used to go to work with my dad. Maybe I wasn't interested in school. I was more interested in having money for her, or to go out with her (his girlfriend)."

Later he said that he finished secondary school in a school for adults and began to work for the FNM as an electrician. He described himself as someone who is very capable of carrying out different types of work and not afraid to lose his job because he had lots of initiative with which to find other options.

I want to extract two central ideas from their assessments of themselves. First, the last excerpts show us their narrative organization of their participation and movements in different social contexts: In Yasenin's case, as the crossroads between her restricted location "send me to another school", and her personal stance: "I just want to start working, help me in". This is a curious, heterogeneous formula of character which integrates collective culture and personal sense. Collective culture in terms of practices of socialization and meaning which the parents deal with for their children, and personal sense as an adopted stance regarding those elements. In Carlos' case, the decision to work in order to have money is a product of the balance of benefits gained from his personal actions: "have money for her". The second central idea is that both move from one context to the other, from family to school, from school to work, from school to the emotional relationships, and they establish different meaningful connections and relationships between them. In their narratives school is not a well-defined, separate space but related to some of the other contexts they participate in, and Carlos and Yasenin show that they are individuals capable of deciding their own orientations and movements among those contexts.

The personal sense facing school obligations

In the railway families the parents use public discourses to legitimate the value of school. They expect their children to stay longer in school because they believe that school certification opens possibilities for getting certain types of jobs and facing economical crisis. The children and teenagers do not always find their parent's vision reasonable but construct their own perspectives. In my study I cannot analyze the

process of construction, but I can analyze the way Carlos and Yasenin, at present, discursively elaborate the value of school for themselves at different moments in their lives. Their stories were an instrument which enabled them to construct images of themselves as children and teenagers located in interconnected social contexts (as children of a family, students, friends, mates, and so on), and which allowed them to discuss the value of school transmitted by their parents. In their narratives they evaluated the meaning of school obligations and compared it with other collective meanings of what was of greater importance for their experience of life.

Initially, they accepted going to school because their parents told them it was compulsory. However, very soon they began to narrate a self-identity as students who used to break the rules or who were not interested in learning. How could we understand Carlos' phrase "What does what I'm listening to have to do with me?" or Yasenin's "I used to misbehave"? In these explanations they appear as responsible for their own misbehavior or indifference to learning even though school plays an important role in these problems. An encyclopedism which saturates students with lots of scientific contents not linked to their everyday lives is a defect of secondary school teaching in Mexico. School learning does not make sense to students because they cannot use much school knowledge in the other social contexts which may interest them more (Quiroz 1991). On the other hand, teachers in public schools have a very heavy workload. They must deal with fifty student groups and fulfill extensive teaching programs. It is understandable that teachers do not have the time or capacity to motivate and direct students' participation towards learning. Disciplinary control is, therefore, a common resource for teachers in managing difficult situations. Carlos and

Yasenin described their identity as problem students which they surely constructed in the school context by means of signals from the teachers and assessments in examinations or grades. Nonetheless, facing this attributed identity, they broke its disqualifying character and gave it a different sense when they narrated examples of their bad behavior as if they were adventures or done for fun. Several researchers have analyzed the student voice as agency and provided examples of diverse forms of resistance such as: students not accepting the social representations with which teachers attempt to construct their identity as students (being a donkey, a bad student, and so on), resisting to work hard in accordance with the demands, or resisting to accept disciplinary rules addressed at their actions (Mirón & Lauria, 1998). This research would lead us to conclude that students have the power to face institutional identities constructed in school contexts and a capability for independent decision making, regarding, for example, whether to continue school or leave it.

Carlos' and Yasenin's parents said they could not study for a longer time because they had to work to help their families. They had an image of themselves as victims of their circumstances. Carlos and Yasenin, on the other hand, said that they made their own decisions and left school even when their parents did not want them to. From one generation to the next there is a change in the way identity is narrated. The parents used one narrative style while Carlos and Yasenin used another to configure their lives as individuals who are not controlled but capable of making their own decisions. How was this possible? Railway families currently have better living conditions than in the past, and they are able to keep their children in school for longer. In the seventies the parents were influenced by public discourses emphasizing the importance of education and the need to

have a higher school certificate in order to access job markets. Perhaps these important changes increased the parents' educational expectations for their children and made them construct practices which encourage individuality, as, for example, when they insist on the value of individual responsibility for school matters (doing your homework or studying on your own accord) or when they resign themselves to accepting that they cannot change the decisions their children make according to their own will. I heard the parents say: "The one who wants to, studies, and the one who doesn't want to, just doesn't" while their children were listening to our conversation, and I think that those moments have an important effect on the way the children learn to define themselves as individuals or to talk about themselves.

Carlos and Yasenin expressed the personal sense they had configured concerning school when they recalled the rare moments when they had been "good students", their fun, their main friendships and emotional relationships in school. When we narrate ourselves, we select the aspects we remember best because they have or had important meaning for our life. Besides, the way we talk about them (annoyed, amused or reflectively) expresses our personal sense about what we narrate. Carlos and Yasenin frequently expressed an irritation and indifference indicating their dislike for school and their preference for other social relationships, such as friendships or romantic relationships. Their evaluations of themselves in their narratives is a moment of great importance. Yasenin says*:* "That just doesn't fit me", and Carlos says: "I don't know, perhaps that world wasn't for me". These phrases express that their adoption of a stance to re-negotiate the semiotic system of constraints. Carlos and Yasenin did not criticize the role of schools, but they did question its character as an obligation because they did not find a

personal sense of life in school. They did not define themselves as individuals determined by their parents or by the value the adults attributed to school, but as individuals who evaluated their situation in school and found that they did not match: that world was not for them.

When a person constructs a personal sense concerning something (school, family, friendship), she does not disconnect it from the collective meanings dealt with in every other social context she participates in, but rather uses them to question them, to compare them, to evaluate them and to make a personal synthesis in a way which enables her to explain her choices. Personal sense is not a matter of a pure subjectivism but is encouraged by specific socialization practices and is a result of the process by which every person appropriates, adapts, resists or legitimizes the collective meanings they have access to. Carlos and Yasenin grew up in families which encouraged an individuality that enabled them to construct images of themselves as individuals who have a will of their own that cannot be changed. The phrase "The one who wants to, studies, and the one who doesn't want to, just doesn't" opens the possibility of thinking about oneself as a person who, lacking the will to study, may decide to do something else. In their narratives, Carlos and Yasenin made reference to diverse collective meanings such as the value of school to get a good job, being a good student or a problem child, the importance of getting a present from the "three wise men", the importance of having a boyfriend or girlfriend, the value of paid work, and so forth. They used these collective meanings to configure a personal perspective, from which to describe their participation in school as complex actions and to describe how they established relationships among the different contexts of school, friendship, family, and work. At the same time, Carlos and Yasenin evalu-

ated these collective meanings in their narratives because they chose which ones made sense to them and which ones did not. For example, they rejected the value of school obligations, because they did not like to go to school, and they legitimated the value of paid work because it was more meaningful for them to work and to have money than to study. When they said "I just want to start working" or "I was more interested in having money", they defined themselves as persons who had a will or personal interests which made them decide to quit school. Therefore, the personal sense they constructed in contrast to the value of school obligations was the result of an implicit acceptance of the character of individuality their parents transmitted to them and of the evaluations and comparisons they made of the different collective meanings they encountered in their participation in the social contexts linked to school.

Conclusions

The sense the parents constructed concerning school implies a strong manifestation of collective meanings associating scholarship with the possibility of getting a good job. However, in their interpretations of the importance of school, the parents disregard changes across generations in their own families, the success they achieved in their careers in FNM, as well as their economic possibilities as member of the working class. In that sense, the parents do not merely reproduce public discourses, they construct a personal sense which synthesizes meanings from different public and personal sources. In contemporary discussion, there is still a strong tendency to evaluate the perspective of working class parents in relation to criteria derived from other social groups. Reay & Ball (1997) say that many investigators and school teachers do

not understand the parents' choices and modes of action in relation to school because their explanatory models are only able to depict them negatively in terms of deficiencies. The teachers in the schools I visited have constructed explanatory models with which they experience the railway families and their children as persons having insufficient interest in succeeding in school. Because these teachers have a different interpretation than the parents of what participation in school should be, they are unable to value these parents' effort to support their children. The parents, on the other hand, are convinced that they have done what is necessary in order to help their children and grant them their own responsibility for their success in school. At the end of this chain of influences, the teenagers who decided to drop out of school justify that they "did not want" to continue because they found other more gratifying life options. The blaming of others without being able to see failures in oneself ends with the student assuming individual responsibility and not conceiving herself as a victim, but as a person capable of deciding and choosing her own life.

My investigation shows that the personal sense parents and children construct in relation to school results from their own experiences of life and thus using meanings derived from the collective culture, they configure explanatory models that are not necessarily similar to the ones the teachers or public discourses hold about what it means to succeed in school. In the research on working class families and their relationship towards school, Willis' (1977) work has been representative. Willis analyzed the opposition students developed towards school as a result of oppression and class stratification. Pupils from working class families reproduced forms of behavior which are favorable to the culture of factory work but not to school culture, because these pupils experi-

enced themselves as future workers who anyway soon were to leave school. The young people I interviewed belong to the working class families of FNM workers. Following Willis' explanatory logic, I should search for the possible relationships between class membership and modes of reaction in school, but that would make me overlook important historical changes across generations and countries. Even in England, Biggart & Furlong (1996) note, it is difficult to maintain that the modes of relating to school Willis identified still exist, due to the strong decline in job opportunities for young people. Students who had hoped to leave school early and get a job, were forced to remain in school as they realized the difficulties they would encounter in getting a job. Biggart & Furlong call this new phenomenon "discouraged workers". It has implied that young people develop an instrumental relationship to school staying longer to get a higher school certificate and waiting for the time to get a job. Pries (1997) says that in European countries the working class culture existed not only as a relationship between the workers and the factory, but as a lifestyle in which factory workers expressed a vibrant self-esteem. There was a natural certainty that they would be wage workers all their lives, and their life in the factory, their neighborhood and in leisure time practices were related to this certainty. According to this author Mexico is different because paid factory workers are a minority in our country with a very heterogeneous working population.

In this study I proposed that it is not possible to limit the analysis of persons' experiences of school to isolated references such as social class, gender or race. It is necessary to analyze a person's complex participation across social contexts encountering different types of collective meanings in relation to multiple references not circumscribed by social class. Carlos and Yasenin described their

experiences of life and mentioned the relationships they established between the different contexts they participated in, and they constructed a personal sense not legitimating the value of school that their parents transmitted to them. In Willis' study (1977) the cultural production of students in school was strongly oriented towards claiming their identity as future workers, while Carlos and Yasenin remembered that they were not interested in their future adult lives, but used to think about the present, the needs they had, the money they wanted to have to buy personal goods, their love affairs. Having money to spend with his girlfriend or to buy a pair of expensive shoes of a famous brand are important signs of how a person knows values and social meanings which are not circumscribed by his social class, but located in social contexts that are open to multiple influences.

It is a major problem of adult discourses in school and families that they try to transmit a too abstract value about school, disconnected from the interests and rewards students meet every day in their participation in school. In general, school is not considered to be related to other contexts. It is expected to be of value in itself, for example, that students must legitimate scientific knowledge in its abstraction. Carlos' and Yasenin's narratives show that this is not possible. The personal sense about school is constructed over time through an individual's participation across different social contexts in which the person appropriates, resists or legitimizes diverse collective meanings allowing her to configure a sense of life which may or may not be associated with school. Further discussion is needed about the criteria for evaluating the choices of students who drop out of school and about what constitutes a "good job" or an acceptable lifestyle.

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