UNDERCLASS IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS. OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

A.H. Lizarazo Guerrero

Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios - UNIMINUTO (COLOMBIA)

Abstract

This paper explores the outcomes of a literature review regarding the obstacles in the education field faced by the underclass in different social environments. Exploring categories such as “Underclass”, through journals specialized in public education between the 2000's and 2018; it was established which elements determine the access to educational environments in this population.

The project “Established and marginalised. A history of internal conflicts of the inhabitants of the Jerusalén-Naciones Unidas neighbourhood in Ciudad Bolivar” completed during 2018 in the locality of Ciudad Bolivar in Bogota, had as its objective to historically reconstruct the process of settlement, identifying the types of relationships, social cohesion and communal organization-mobilization starting with the arrival of inhabitants that may be sociologically characterized as marginalized or underclass according to the theories proposed by Elias & Scotson (1965) [1].

The results of the project points out that the underclass, concept that refers to the migrant population from different regions of the country that establishes in peripheral areas of main cities, in this case the country’s capital, are faced with adverse situations marked by the lack of economic (lack of both resources and possibilities to access formal jobs) and social security (absence of public services and state institutions in charge of social assistance); adding the inherent difficulties of living in alien cultural and sometimes, ethnic contexts. Nevertheless, the analysis points out that this dynamic is not present in the location under study, but it is an observable phenomenon in other main cities around the globe where this internal migration also occurs.

The paper will focus in one of the complex situations faced by the population under study: education and the obstacles to access it as a marginalized or underclass; aiming to address the phenomenon from a literature review to show the different ways in which these obstacles are present and the challenges in solving them.

Keywords: Underclass, obstacles in education, migration processes.

1 INTRODUCTION

The reflections arising from different academic backgrounds (specially from history, geography, sociology and anthropology) regarding the processes of emergence and consolidation of different territories (neighbourhoods, villas, quarters, etc.), has allowed to identify the recognition of both, the dynamics of settlement in the territory, as well as the different relationship practices that historically have happened; enable the study of current social phenomena in hindsight, thus evidencing the continuity in time of problematics that affect the population in a permanent manner.

Considering said reflection, the research which feeds this paper was entitled “Established and marginalised. A history of internal conflicts of the inhabitants of the Jerusalén-Naciones Unidas neighbourhood in Ciudad Bolivar”, based in the relationships that developed between two groups of inhabitants (one of founders and one of underclass) that arrived in different moments to two neighbourhoods of the locality of Ciudad Bolivar in Bogota; one characterized for being a centre of discrimination dynamics and social inequity, with high indices of poverty, violence and insecurity; resulting in the systematic process of stigmatization and discrimination from the general population [2] [3].

As a result, it was established the way the condition of “underclass”, of the majority of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood by the 1980 decade (mainly inner migrants from different parts of the country, searching for new settling possibilities in the city, either because of violence in their places of origin or for economic prosperity), who settled in the margins of the city, typified by a series of lacks in relation to basic services for proper livelihood, such as running water, sewage services, electricity, public transport, among others. As a result, and due to the urgency to cover such basic needs, other services
which require more financial investment and logistic, such as education and health facilities, where not present (or where present but in an unsubstantial manner).

Regarding the access to education, aspects such as cultural appropriation by migrants in the area, expectation management concerning their life projects, the role of the school in the communities, the neglect by the State, and the economic hardships, have been elements that add to the complexity of the analysis and endow its significance. Following these arguments and after an in-depth literature review, the present paper aims to underline the main obstacles faced by the underclass, in terms of the access to education in different contexts, as well as the challenges made evident from the results of the research.

2 METHODOLOGY

The concept “underclass” was established as a key word used in the search for articles in specialized research magazines in education, between the years 2000 and 2018. The search repositories included Redalyc, Dialnet and Scielo, as well as SCImago Journal y Country Rank. The initial search resulted in a total of 40 articles, which later were classified according to its relevance and pertinence to the subject (those that addressed the category on “underclass” in school or university and showed the existence of obstacles and particularities regarding the access to education), resulting in 18 articles, which were processed in a matrix with general categories for the analysis: “underclass” (to establish how the concept was defined in each article) and obstacles (or barriers) to the access to education. Each category had subcategories which allowed a more in-depth analysis of the findings.

3 RESULTS

From the literature review and the analysis of the selected articles, it was possible to identify particularities regarding the notion of “underclass”, as well as the obstacles for the access and effective permanence in the learning processes. A series of general aspects were established, with minor or mayor intensity, but in a transversal manner, in all the documents revised, therefore enabling the construction of a general framework of results.

This process allowed the determination of a series of elements that broaden the spectrum since they share traits with the categories above; as well as evidencing the insufficient information in the educational field. A central element of the findings were the obstacles and challenges identified regarding the learning process in relation with the subject of interest, adding to the reflection on the notion of “underclass”. These topics are explained hereafter, condensing the results of the revision exercise.

3.1 Obstacles in the learning process

3.1.1 Cultural uproot and discrimination.

The obstacles in the learning process have positioned themselves, through this review, as those adverse situations and phenomenon that obstruct an effective involvement in the educational process, by people from social groups characterized by economic lacking and adverse life conditions; mostly product of migration dynamics from the countryside to the city.

The encounter between different cultural backgrounds is one of the key elements that occurs when people alien to the city, are inserted in a formal scheme of education, developed in the framework of city life, to and by its inhabitants. The contact with individuals foreign to its traditions, with different dialects and costumes, among other situations, result in a rootless group with the perpetual feeling of not belonging anywhere, which directly affects the learning process. This is intensified because of the use of methods and contents developed for the typical urban environment, in which there is not an evident recognition of the particularities of the city periphery or spaces that differentiate from the urban status.

In this context, it is evident the emergence of different dynamics of discrimination by the academic community, which reflects other social spaces in which the student’s families are faced with exclusion [4], affecting the perception and the image the “underclass” have of themselves, and the idea of the role and space they occupy within the school. An aggravating circumstance is the fact that the population that arrives, have different levels of alphabetization which do not correspond to the academic requirements of the educational system; in some cases because never before have they
gone to school, either because of the non-existent infrastructure, or because going to school in itself was not considered relevant [5]; this opens new modalities of differentiation with other students, and demands a greater effort to level up in the required knowledge.

Said conditions, where the economic needs and lack of basic services are the most urgent concerns to be addressed, the school is the chosen place to leave children whilst the parents are working, which marks the school as more than a formative enclosure, but as a safe place for children, regardless of the academic component.

In addition, studying isn’t necessarily part of the life project of the “underclass”, whom arrive in the city in search for progress and change and find that through working, there is a better chance to enter economical circles that weren’t available before. This in its own, distance people from pursuing a higher education, added to the fact that most universities and other formative institutes tend to be in zones of difficult access for the periphery inhabitants.

Hence forth, the different processes of cultural uproot, discrimination and rejection of the role of school in life projects that do not consider the formation in educational institutes indispensable, comprise in a general view, the common topics identified in the review process. However, there are particularities and differences, depending on the context they are constituted as the elements that allow the establishment of a general framework, from which it is possible to approach to said contexts, and develop research and reflections in-situ that may permit an effective way of overcome the obstacles previously described.

3.1.2 Underclass. Beyond class and spatial location.

Alongside the learning obstacles identified, it was possible to recognize the presence of postures regarding social groups under the category “underclass”, which are determined considering a series of specific and restraining aspects mentioned hereunder. In the conclusion section, there would be a reflection about it.

The articles addressed in the review, have permitted the establishment of two main approaches to the use of the concept “underclass”, both in the frame of urban context as a predilect scene, and centred in the characterization of social groups, which differentiate by its social class or spatial location.

The use of the term “underclass” to refer to a specific social group, specially present in capital cities, which, given their extension and demographic density, enable the existence of marked dynamics of differentiation from the social class of the subjects; is used as a discourse strategy that allows the characterization of conglomerates facing new forms of poverty, which extend beyond the economic aspect, and who face in their everyday life, dynamics of social disintegration, school desertion, illicit drug consumption and teen pregnancy, among others [6].

Other characterization of the “underclass”, beyond its social class (but not completely untangled from it), occurs by means of the recognition of processes of spatial segregation, where the “underclass” represent a geographically isolated group within the borders of the city, product of the preconceived notion hold by the general population [6], that perceive them as a source of insecurity and social instability, on account of the relationship of its location on the peripheries, with patterns that may affect the social stability of the other city inhabitants.

This is how the economic factor, specially the existence of poverty in some social groups, as well as the geographical location, a direct result of the segregation, compose two ways in which the underclass is viewed in the framework of social and academic reflection.

4 CONCLUSIONS

After the general review of the main results in relation to the obstacles in the learning process and the category of “underclass”, it is possible to explore a conclusive exercise in which the existing challenges are palpable.

It is evident the necessity to develop projects and strategies, to be implemented by institutions and the educational system, in which the presence of migrant population is recognized and with conditions characteristic of the preconceived notion of “underclass”. Recognizing the needs and the obstacles of the learning process, is how it is possible to ensure transformations in the formation of the subjects. The need arises for there to be systems of reception that allow the access, participation and continuity of the students, tackling the high desertion levels [4]. This must be undertaken recognizing that in
each context has constitutive elements, independent of the objectives they pursue, that will encourage processes of homogenization of the population.

The rethinking of processes and strategies with cultural pertinence and coexistence is not enough. It is fundamental that integral strategies in the territories, where there is recognition of the ways in which the notion of “underclass”, is perpetuated due to the lack of attention and support to life conditions. The lack of services and the priority given to work, are a direct result of the State neglect [7] and a structural tendency, that situates the lower classes as workmanship and as subject destined to informal work, not recognizing their capacities in the academic context. This also shows the power of preconceived notions, regarding education as an indicator of the growth and development of a country, therefore, by building infrastructure and widening of the coverage of the service, aims to fulfil a series of requirements that do not consider the differential necessities of the population in relation with content and methodologies of formation [8].

Regarding the category “underclass”, it is evident its links to it being an index of low class, or as a segregated location. Even though there is an obvious need to address the situation, there is a limit to its approach, reducing its subjects to a one-dimensional nature. The revision of the concept requires to stop viewing the “underclass” as merely a “low class”, and beginning to recognize its situation, as a complex network of social groups that in occasions, conform different communities and other expectations facing education and livelihood.

To comprehend the uproot that characterises these communities, it is of great importance, to view them beyond the economic and geographical features, and to empathise and of recognise, their subjectivities and particularities, over the homogenization processes and the negative connotations imposed from outside.

REFERENCES


