

INTRODUCTION

Questions and Methods

for a Study of Student Culture

Todos somos iguales. We are all equal. How many times had the students spoken some version of this phrase to me, and in how many different contexts? In my early fieldwork at this secondary school, I dutifully noted it down, but not until about halfway through the research did I realize just how pervasive the phrase was.

How, when, and where did this phrase crop up? In many cases, students asserted *todos somos iguales* in response to some prompt of mine. They brought it up in discussions I initiated about group dynamics, teacher favoritism, or a number of other school-related topics. I was struck by the way the students unanimously and vehemently rejected my suggestions that teachers might discriminate against students by ethnicity, class, or gender. Sometimes the students smuggled the words in obliquely, to mask how certain students appeared to be rejected by their classmates or to justify wearing the same school uniform every day. Sometimes they used the expression spontaneously, in heated conversation with other students or in explaining something when I had not even broached the subject. In every case, students said it with a kind of insistence, an urgency, that always caught my attention. It was as if they were trying to convince themselves and their classmates, as well as me, that it were true. It was as if they were at once affirming and ordering their experience.

The rhetorical assertion of equality required me to rethink many of the

expectations I had carried into the field. I would be forced to work things out, as my Mexican friends might say, *sobre la marcha*—as I went along. After all, I had come to this Mexican secondary school expecting to find deep class and racial divisions reflected in student talk and action. I was on the lookout for discourses of difference, and thought such discourses would privilege certain students. I was expecting student subcultures to be structured around these notions of difference and to channel some students' aspirations while squelching others. Instead, the assertion of equality gave me a figurative slap in the face. I looked more closely and found that students valued their similarities more than their differences. Even as some students formed exclusive friendship groups and made occasionally disparaging comments toward fellow students, the discourse of equality continued to undermine the dynamics of social division.

What I had discovered were some of the key symbolic resources for students to play what I call a cultural “game” of equality. Students appropriated teachers' discourses on equality, and organizational structures of solidarity, to produce their own strategic solidarity and identification, often directed toward specific material and ideological ends in the classroom. Students also took up these discourses in an effort to maneuver about in the sea of social differences among themselves. Mostly as individuals, but sometimes as members of informal friendship groups, students negotiated their positions in the game of equality, embracing, modifying, or even rejecting its rules along the way. The play of *todos somos iguales* probably acted to forestall or arrest the emergence of distinct and oppositional student subcultures. It provided students with an important common idiom through which to position their identities.¹

How and why does this culture, this game of equality, arise at a provincial Mexican secondary school, and how and why does it help create common identifications among students across significant social differences? What are the organizational and discursive resources students appropriate to construct this culture? What is its power and influence relative to the moral forces of family, church, workplace, and other sites of adult authority? To what extent and in what manner does the school-based culture become part of students' broader identities and aspirations, playing a part in the trajectories their lives take? How, then, does the school as an institution participate in structuring students' life opportunities and positions? Such questions emerge most pointedly out of a body of scholarly literature known as social and cultural reproduction theory in education (see appendix A for details). Reproduction theory has

sought to explain how schools in modern class societies contribute to the perpetuation—the “reproduction”—of structured inequalities between groups defined by class, race, gender, or other characteristics. Early studies in reproduction theory emphasized the work the school accomplishes in unjustly sorting students and preparing them differentially for their existing places in life. More recent research has shown the complexities and contradictions in how schools “work,” and has highlighted the way students creatively respond to the contexts of school. Students make meaning out of their schooling experience; through interaction with parents, teachers, and other students, they construct aspirations and enduring identities. In addition to the subject matter, they learn to be certain kinds of persons, and this learning carries over into their subsequent lives.

Here, I pay particular attention to the dynamics of class, ethnicity, and gender in Mexico. I show how school practices in turn both differentiate and unify students according to such characteristics. The work of the school is indeed complex, and is perhaps poorly accounted for by reproduction theory. Yet more crucial still is the creative student response. Students draw on existing class, ethnic, and gender identities to make sense of school, but they also form new kinds of identities within, and sometimes against, school structures and discourses. The cultural game of equality becomes an important crucible for students to work out their position vis-à-vis school, hence their position in society more generally.

This book attempts to account for the sociocultural world in which the phrase *todos somos iguales* has great meaning. It is an account of how relations are structured at a Mexican secondary school such that equality is a major concern to its many participants. I aim to show not that *todos somos iguales* is necessarily true or false but that it circulates as a normative claim within a broad economy of meanings, and therefore enters into students’ identities and aspirations. Equality becomes part of a strategic and serious “game” students play, a purposeful practice that draws together students’ social backgrounds and personal goals in a field of power and identity.² Like the anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1996, 12–16), I view Escuela Secundaria Federal (ESF) students as historical actors involved in “serious games.” In attempting to overcome the binarism of previous theories of structure and agency, Ortner coins this phrase to show

that social life is culturally organized and constructed, in terms of defining categories of actors, rules and goals of the games, and so forth; that social life is precisely social, consisting of webs of relationship and

interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions, none of which can be extracted as autonomous “agents”; and yet at the same time there is “agency,” that is, actors play with skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence. The idea that the game is “serious” is meant to add into the equation the idea that power and inequality pervade the games of life in multiple ways, and that, while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process, the stakes of these games are often very high. (12)

Theorists like Norbert Elias (in Goudsblom and Mennell 1998) and Pierre Bourdieu (1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) have also employed the metaphor of games to conceptualize practice.³ The metaphor of playing a game is especially appropriate for the adolescent context of the Mexican *secundaria*, where highjinks and humor permeate daily life. Yet the game of equality is, in an important sense, also the game of life in the town of San Pablo—the intersubjective positioning of self in and around the local school, and the ensuing consequences for personal careers and socio-economic trajectories. The rules and resources of the game both enable and constrain (see Giddens 1979; Varenne and McDermott 1998), and the immediate play of identity in the contexts of school life is inexorably linked to the broader temporal and spatial structures of political economy.

In this ethnography of Mexican student culture and identity formation, the scene shifts quite frequently, ranging from microanalyses of classroom and street interactions to the national educational bureaucracy and global flows of popular culture. My primary concern is with students’ forms of action and self-expression in the context of the school and the community where it is located, as well as later in the students’ lives, in circumstances as disparate as law school or an agricultural field in the state of Oregon. Yet before I can focus my analysis squarely on the students, I must situate them geographically, historically, structurally, and institutionally.

Thus, in the first part of the book, I chart the broad historical, political, and institutional contexts for discourses of equality and solidarity. I try to account for the Mexican State’s involvement in providing such symbolic resources for student culture. In chapter 1, I undertake a history of the Mexican *secundaria* in relation to Mexican political economy, educational philosophy, and state formation. The chapter charts the central importance of shifting concepts of adolescence, solidarity, and equality in the development of the *secundaria*, and ends with a brief historical sketch of the region of San Pablo and the school, *ESF*, where I did my fieldwork.

Chapter 2 tells the story of my own journey to San Pablo: my first visit in 1985, subsequent ones in 1988 and 1989—when I began formulating the research project—and my arrival in 1990 for a full year of fieldwork. I also discuss pertinent aspects of the history of the region around San Pablo, and describe the school, city, and region in terms of social class, economy, and population growth. Chapter 3 picks up from the historical account of ESF and continues the ethnographic journey through the beginning of the school year to see just what kind of institution the students encountered. What did teachers say and do, and how was the school week and year organized? What kinds of contexts made up the institutional structure—the concrete practices and discourses framing students’ experience in the school? Among other things, I examine what the school looks and feels like to incoming students; how and why teachers form students into socially and academically diverse cohorts (*grupos escolares*) that stay together for most classes and activities through all three years of secondary study; the school’s layout, and regular round of rituals and routines; the patterns of curriculum, evaluation, and pedagogical practice among teachers; and the components of the school’s “gender regime” given by teacher example and expectation.

Having set the ethnographic scene, and rendered intelligible the historical and institutional contexts for student action, in chapter 4 I shift to the ethnographic account of such action. The narrative focuses on how and why students constructed a “cultural game of equality” in the grupo escolar. I describe what life was like in each of the four grupos I chose for intensive study. Then I demonstrate the means and effects of a grupo-based cultural game of equality, including a powerful “ethic of solidarity,” and cultural forms like “passing homework” (*pasando la tarea*) and “goofing off” (*echando relajo*). In chapter 5, I provide a profile of socialization sites and patterns outside the school in order to give the reader a clearer sense of the range of social differences converging in the school. Then the discussion shifts back to the school, where I examine how the construction of grupo identity and solidarity complements a *school* identification, produced in relation to other local schools, as well as a *schooled* identity, produced in relation to the relatively unschooled. The remainder of the chapter presents ethnographic descriptions of how the schooled identity works to structure relationships, aspirations, and desires in and out of school. Chapter 6 highlights the tensions and contradictions in students’ appropriations and uses of the meanings of solidarity and equality. The chapter opens with portraits of several students and their friend-

ship groups, and moves on to analyze the way notions of equality and solidarity limit, but do not prohibit, the expression of class, ethnic, gender, and age differences in student culture. I present evidence of an emerging youth culture based on the consumption of cultural media, and show how this youth culture provides yet another arena for the structuring of equality and difference among students. Finally, I end the chapter with a specific focus on female students' orientations to school achievement and romantic attachment, and their correspondingly ambiguous strategies for social empowerment. Because structures of gender inequality continue to privilege men over women in Mexico, the analysis of gender relations must especially account for how and why young women struggle to carve out meaningful life options for themselves.

Chapter 7 shifts gears and extends the temporal range of the study. It opens with observations about the changes that San Pablo has undergone in the six years from 1991 to 1997, especially the deepening economic crisis. It then moves on to an update of the twenty-two focal students in the study, developing in-depth portraits of eight focal students, four males and four females. In chapter 8, I weave together a synopsis of my findings with prior work in the field, proposing new formulations of the relation between student subjectivity and school structure, and modifying cultural reproduction theory for the unique Mexican case. In so doing, I answer the questions posed earlier and provide an account of the contingencies that influenced students' trajectories after their *secundaria* years. Finally, I stress the comparative importance of the case, and the illumination it provides for questions of education and identity not only in Mexico but elsewhere, too.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODS AND SCHOOL SITE

I wanted to do a single study of difference in state schooling, so it was imperative that I find a school significantly heterogeneous in class, ethnic, and gender terms. This only seemed possible in a small city like San Pablo, since *secundarias* in both the larger metropolises and smaller towns tend to greater homogeneity. Because there was no high-quality private alternative in San Pablo, and because there were no geographic restrictions on enrollment, ESF had a rather heterogeneous student body. Students from the wealthiest and poorest families alike clamored to enroll at ESF, which boasted a regional prominence and longevity (since 1941) no other local *secundaria* could match.

Like most urban schools in Mexico, ESF was divided into morning and afternoon shifts (*turnos*) that shared the same principal and several of the same teachers, but that effectively functioned as two separate schools. I concentrated my efforts on the morning shift, whose class composition tended to be more heterogeneous than either the afternoon shift at ESF or the other two public secundarias in town, where the lower classes prevailed. The morning shift at ESF included children from San Pablo's monied, professional, skilled, and unskilled working classes, as well as some 13 percent who lived in outlying towns and villages, and so traveled daily to attend school. In addition, the morning shift had a higher proportion of girls to boys than any other public secundaria.

I chose to focus my research on the secundaria and not some other educational level for several reasons. The secundaria—or the level of schooling called *educación media básica* in Mexico—expanded drastically in the 1960s and 1970s, incorporating new social groups that had been previously excluded. Yet there has always been a high drop out rate between the first and third years of secundaria, and in recent years, overall enrollment has been declining in some areas, including the one where I did the study. Secundaria is also the last point in the Mexican “basic education” cycle.⁴ After secundaria, students must choose between several different options, including college preparatories, vocational schools, “business” courses (*comercio*), and secretarial or cosmetological schools (see figure 1). Finally, most authors in the literature on student cultures have identified early adolescence as the period when strong subcultural identification often begins to develop. Social psychological processes of identity formation at this age encourage students to define themselves as members of distinct groups, over and against other groups (Woods 1990; Eckert 1989). This is crucial for understanding what students make of social difference in the school.

Of all the students in the school, I focused especially on the third graders, in their last year of secundaria (ninth grade in U.S. terms). I did this for two reasons. First, by their third year, students were likely to have gained a high degree of social competence in, and a high level of knowledge about, the rules and meanings of secondary schooling. Students were formed into *grupos escolares* that remained together in virtually every class period for all three years (see chapters 3 and 4). Thus, by their third and final year, students were likely to have developed well-defined strategies for negotiating the maze of requirements, expectations, and rules constituting the institutional structure of the school. They came to know

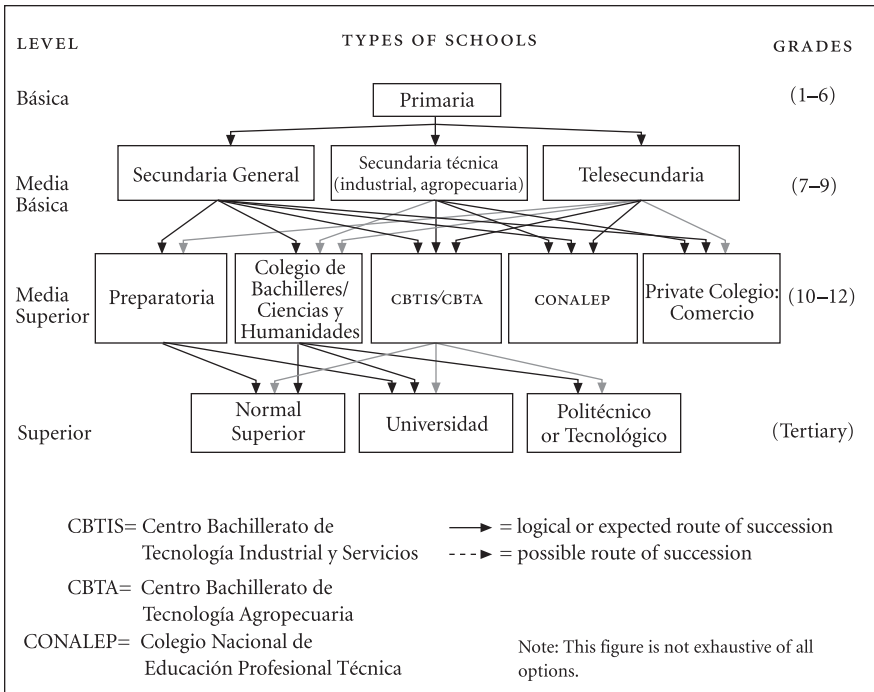


Fig. 1. Major options and paths in Mexican schooling, 1991

individual teachers well, and had learned the limits of accepted behavior for each one of them, as well as for the school more generally. Perhaps most important of all, third-year students, organized into grupos escolares, had come to know their fellow classmates in some intimate detail.

The second reason I chose to concentrate on third-year students was the imminence of rather difficult and determining decisions. Because they had to soon decide whether to continue studying, and if so, at what type of school, the third year was pivotal for these students (Mir 1979, 107). I expected the dynamics of identity and cultural production to have a strong impact on the formation of educational and occupational aspirations.

After two previous brief research forays (a total of five weeks during June and July of 1988; another four weeks during September and October of 1989), I arrived in San Pablo in the early summer of 1990 and took up residence in the home of two teachers from ESF. During most of the summer, I sought to make contact with students I had met during the previous trips. In August, when all the teachers were returning for administrative tasks and students were coming to enroll, I began spending more time around the school, observing parent-teacher interactions, attending

teacher meetings, and sitting in on special exams for the previous year's failed students. Because of my familiarity with the community and previous research clearance with school authorities, I was allowed virtually unconstrained access to all facets of school life, including classrooms, office dynamics, teacher union meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. I was also given access to all relevant school and student records, and collected a number of site documents, such as exams, informational flyers, memos, and political pamphlets. I also gathered what material I could about the school's social and institutional history, and interviewed several teachers about the same.

For most of the school year, from late August to late June, I was engaged in participant observation at the school. This chiefly involved classroom and playground observations, where I paid special attention to four of the six third-year grupos escolares (chapter 4). I also participated in extracurricular activities, attending parties, dances, church services, sports events, civic ceremonies, and study groups.

By early October, after more than a month of participant observation, I began choosing some twenty focal students for the study. I tried to select students I had met during previous trips, or who had shown some interest or confidence in me when I began my observations. In some cases, I sought to deliberately cultivate trust with those students I initially judged interesting or problematic. These twenty students ultimately represented a full range of backgrounds, dispositions, and academic records in the school. Ten were girls and ten were boys; some were judged by teachers and their peers to be "good" students, others "bad," still others "average"; some were clearly rebellious, constantly challenging teachers' authority, while others seemed more compliant; some were poor, others moderately comfortable, others part of a local elite. Moreover, the twenty were fairly evenly distributed across the four grupos escolares I had decided to study. Over the course of the year, I extensively interviewed each of these students at least twice, sometimes three times. I asked them questions about their personal and educational histories, and encouraged them to discuss their experiences since the last time we had spoken. My aim here was to fathom what events or experiences were salient to them in their young lives. Besides the interviews, I made particular note of these students during my observations. The observations provided an important angle on student concerns, and thus complemented the perspectives that emerged in interviews.

It must be said that as the year progressed, some of these relationships

fared better than others. To be sure, a few students became more reticent during and after the first interview than I had anticipated. Perhaps it was not what they had expected (beyond the chance to skip part of a class for the interview) or perhaps the novelty soon wore off. (In some cases, I conducted the first interviews in the presence of a friend in order to lighten the atmosphere.) A few of these students successfully stonewalled my persistent attempts to visit their homes and interview their families. On the other hand, some students I had not initially expected to become focal subjects turned out to be rather insightful and forthcoming, and I found myself bringing them into the study anyway. I did visit the homes of most of the focal students and interviewed one or more of their parents in an extended, taped format. In a few instances, I developed an ongoing relationship with the families, visiting frequently throughout the year. I also interviewed all the teachers of these twenty focal students. In the end, the exact number of focal students fluctuated (I include twenty-two in the final analysis, chapters 4–7), and the group did not evenly represent the social class proportions in the school. Certainly I came to know best those students from more socially and economically stable families. Having said this, I don't believe my experience was unusually skewed, either. As will become clear, I did get to know students and families across the whole range.

At the beginning of the school year, I conducted a short socioeconomic survey of all registered students at the school ($n = 667$), and toward the end of the school year, I did a much more detailed survey of nearly all third graders in the morning shift ($n = 190$) as well as most of those in the afternoon shift ($n = 92$; see results in chapter 2). Beyond establishing a basic student body profile, my aim here was to provide a broader grounding for some of my initial analyses emerging from the qualitative data. To understand differences between schools in San Pablo, I administered the same survey to several groups of third-year students at both another public *secundaria* in town ($n = 69$) and a private *secundaria* ($n = 42$). I also visited every other *secundaria* and high school–level (*educación media superior*) school in town, speaking briefly with administrators and secretaries, and collecting information about programs, enrollment, and curricula. Aside from the surveys, I left San Pablo in July of 1991 with well over 3,000 single-spaced pages of field notes and interview transcripts. Chapters 3 through 6 present the better part of my analysis of that data.

In the summers of 1993 and 1995, and again in the spring of 1997, I returned to San Pablo for periods of three to six weeks. During that time, I

visited with teachers and families, collected documents, and most important, sought out my focal students for chats and interviews. Chapter 7 depicts the story of San Pablo and those students between the years 1991 and 1998.

The cultural game that ESF students created—the meanings they produced—had both sources and repercussions well beyond the immediate ambit of school. In order to understand what happened inside the school in 1990, one must examine the historical antecedents of contemporary Mexican education as well as the biographical details students brought from their families and communities. Then, in order to grasp the subsequent impact of what happened inside the school in 1990, one must follow the students' lives and pay close attention to their words. This book tells their stories, in and out of school, from 1988 through 1998. Yet before we rejoin their stories we must better situate them amid the others that make theirs possible: stories of the nation, the city, the school, and the anthropologist who writes them.