

Hierarchical processes in university secondary schools in Argentina

Procesos de jerarquización en secundarias universitarias en Argentina

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Abstract

This paper analyses the processes of legitimization of socio-educational inequalities in secondary schools focusing on the production of asymmetries based on the affirmation of distances with respect to “the others” in prestigious institutions dependent on a National University in Argentina. The methodological approach was based on a multiple case study. Between 2012 and 2016 were made observations, documentary analysis, 13 in-depth interviews with “key” actors and 67 semi-structured interviews with teachers. The results show multiple and overlapping processes of “self-legitimization by distancing”: the “others” are the dependent schools of the Province of Buenos Aires, the private schools, the other undergraduate schools or the other specialty. Borders are mobile: a work of hierarchy consolidates these schools into an elite place.

Keywords

Secondary schools, social inequality, elite, cultural differentiation, boundaries.

Resumen

Se analizan procesos de legitimación de desigualdades socioeducativas en escuelas secundarias enfocándose en la producción de asimetrías a partir de la afirmación de distancias con respecto a “los otros” en prestigiosas instituciones dependientes de una Universidad Nacional en Argentina. El enfoque metodológico partió de un estudio de caso múltiple. Entre 2012 y 2016 se realizaron observaciones, análisis documental, 13 entrevistas en profundidad a actores “clave” y 67 semiestructuradas a docentes. Los resultados muestran procesos múltiples y superpuestos de “autolegitimación por distanciamiento”: los “otros” son las escuelas dependientes de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, las privadas, las otras de pregrado o la otra especialidad. Las fronteras son móviles: un trabajo de jerarquización consolida a estas escuelas en un lugar de elite.

Palabras clave

Escuela secundaria, desigualdad social, elite, educación, diferenciación cultural, fronteras.

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Introduction and state of the issue

In this paper we analyse processes of legitimization of socio-educational inequalities in secondary schools, focusing on the production of hierarchies from symbolic borders with respect to “the others” present in a prestigious and over demanded¹ group of institutions dependent on a National University in Argentina. From a relational approach of inequalities, self-legitimation processes are studied for distancing that allow this group of schools located in the city of La Plata, capital of the Province of Buenos Aires, to distinguish themselves through the subalternization of their “others” and to constitute themselves as elites from the delimitation of borders.

As is well known, the construction of unequal educational circuits is not subsumed to the existence of public and private schools, but inequalities multiply and overlap. In this way, there are private schools that serve popular sectors and others to medium and high sectors. The same dynamic is replicated in the public sector, as observed in the schools selected in this research.

It is a group of state institutions that historically served middle and high sectors recruited through the eliminatory entrance examination and that, in the 80s - in the context of democratic opening after the last and fiercest civic military dictatorship in the country- they modified their method of admission to the public lottery, adapting to the configuration that acquired the “democratizing” mandate at that time. One of the schools, of artistic specialty, partially adopted the lottery in the 80s and did it completely only from 2015, when the significant “inclusion” became a key word of the epochal climate. It should be added that the National University of La Plata has three levels: undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate. The first of them belong to five establishments, four of secondary education and one of primary: a secondary with agro-technical orientation is located in the *partido* of 25 de Mayo (Province of Buenos Aires) and another four in the City of La Plata. Three of the latter are secondary schools, which in the present work will be identified as School 1, 2 and 3.

1 In 2017 there were 687 registered for 184 vacancies in the School, 3 539 registered for 130 vacancies in School 1 and 370 applicants for 85 vacancies in the case of School 2 according to official information.

As indicated by Reygadas (2008), numerous works address the idea that, based on classifications, societies establish limits that define sets of relationships from which a certain hierarchical order is created. Although there are differences between different authors who have referred to this problem, the hierarchical power of social classifications is rescued. For his part, Max Weber (1969) postulated the existence of status groups explained by the unequal distribution of social prestige. Likewise, Gerard Cohen (1996) refers to the “mystique of excellence” and to the “elite cults” that allow a group to validate and sustain its privileged status by stating that they possess few and exclusive qualities that are essential for society as a whole.

Charles Tilly’s (2000) analysis of categorical pairs also shows us that the symbolic plane collaborates in the construction of limits that act as boundaries between social groups. This author responds to a relational approach of inequality (Stich and Colyar, 2013), studying the work of construction and reproduction of symbolic limits (boundary work). For the author, the dichotomous categories constitute strategies of the dominant groups in order to exclude other groups and block access to certain resources.

For his part, Norbert Elías (1998) studies an urban community, which he calls Winston Parva, characterized by the division between two groups of residents: a workers’ group established more time ago in relation to a new settlement of workers. The author points out that in this small community there is a universal theme in miniature: “in all these cases the most powerful group sees itself as better people” (1998, p. 82). Among the residents there were no differences in terms of educational level, occupation, income, ethnicity, however, the “newcomers” were stigmatized as persons of lower human value. In this sense, he points out that any theory that explains power differentials exclusively in relation to the monopolistic possession of objects is limited, on the contrary, he explains processes of distinction that are generated from differences in seniority. Next, processes of present asymmetry manufacturing in the schools addressed are analyzed in which, as will be shown, the hierarchies are juxtaposed and the borders are unstable.

Materials and methods

The methodological approach was based on a multiple case study that combined qualitative methodologies for data collection. The case study

focuses on the dynamics that occur in particular scenarios (Eisenhardt, 1989): in this research, two undergraduate schools dependent on the National University of La Plata located in the city of the same name. One of them fully adopted the lottery mechanism as a form of entry since the mid-1980s based on a “democratizing” discourse. The other adopted this mechanism of admission partially at the time of the return of democracy to the country, incorporating it for the total of aspirants only from the year 2015 in a context in which gravitated a narrative in favour of educational “inclusion”.

Following the classification proposed by Stake (1995), this research is based on the type of “instrumental” case study, since the interest does not only reside in the case itself but is mobilized by a broader conceptual problem than the study of these particular cases can illuminate. In this sense, processes of production and legitimation of socio-educational inequalities are explored, placing the focus on the construction of hierarchies through the study of two of the three average institutions dependent on a National University located in the capital of the Province of Buenos Aires.

Between the years 2012 and 2016 observations were made in both schools, interviewed in depth thirteen “key” actors for the institutions (managers, heads of departments, extension secretaries and academic secretaries of the schools and the university), made sixty-seven Semistructured interviews with open and closed questions to randomly² selected teachers, a *corpus* composed of six institutional documents that included sociodemographic information of the entrants and on the admission methods in force at the dependent secondary schools of national universities. Next, we will analyse the main results of the research in regard to the construction of borders that position these institutions in an elite place from the eyes of teachers and key actors.

Neither provincial nor private: university. Symbolic borders between university, provincial and private schools

Since we are few and we know each other a lot in this small city, framed between avenues and crossed by its diagonals, [School 1] has arranged the follow-up of its students by the classrooms and lost corridors of the faculties (...) And with great astonishment has confirmed (...) what we all know:

2 According to Stake (1995), there are several possibilities to select the components in a probabilistic sample. In the present investigation, we opted for a systematic sample: the list of teachers from each school was taken and starting from a starting point, the count was taken considering diverse disciplinary formations.

the graduate of school 1 adapts to any circumstance, solves problems with solvency and stands out among his peers. A pinturita. (...) In her 53 years of school of young ladies and her 40 years of [School 1], a mixed school, she can boast of having been an intellectual nursery, a nursery of colourful fish; because among the fauna and flora of its graduates, awards, scholarship holders, successful researchers and discoverers at the international level shine, without obstacles (UNLP, 2001, p. 46).

The symbolic borders are multiple and overlap. Taking up the contributions of Amy Siych and Julia Colyar (2013), far from all binarism, one cannot think that the distances are fixed once and for all, but rather it is about mobile limits that demarcate the groups at a certain moment and in opposition to a certain “other”. That is to say that there is no fixed and homogeneous “we” but that the figure of “the other” is porous and unstable insofar as it is delimited in terms of the production of the group itself (Latour, 2008) and can even be part of the us in a given time and space.

It is possible to analyze the effort of teachers and key actors consulted in Schools 1 and 2 in order to differentiate themselves from those whom they institute as their “others” in the key that all the elites work to constitute themselves as such. This work is necessary to perform asymmetries that affirm them in their place; the “other” in this case is constituted by three fronts: on the one hand, by private schools; on the other, by the “provincial” schools; finally, for the other two schools that make up the group of secondary undergraduate establishments in the city of La Plata.

With respect to differentiation in the case of private schools, an ideological dimension emerges when it is emphasized that education is not a service to be “commodified”: the interviewees maintain that they would not “spend” on education, since it is the duty of the State to secure it thus, in the case of School 1 the elected director, whom we will call Juliana, indicated:

It is more ideological, I would not work in a private school of any kind because I think the school is public and that the public school gives more ... although in private have the best air conditioning, the latest plasma, latest model with all the digital technology to see ... there are things that the ghetto of the private school does not give you ... (Juliana, director, School 1).

In these discourses the interviewees appear, as indicated by Crozier et al. (2008) when analysing the school choice of the white middle class in the United Kingdom, as the “champions of public education”. It is, however, a

particular type of public education in which private schools are not chosen as long as the possibility of sociability among middle class families in public schools is maintained. Crozier refers to parents who monitor the situation from what he calls “a moral ambiguity of the middle class” as they pretend, on the one hand, to be egalitarian and, on the other, to improve their social position.

In the 1990s, in a context of deterioration of state educational institutions in the country in which they found themselves under-funded and overburdened with functions (Tenti Fanfani, 2011, p. 146), there was a massive abandonment of this type of establishments by sectors of greater purchasing power, boosting the boom of private establishments. Although the expansion of the private circuit had begun in the 1960s in a process of differentiation that accompanied the context of expanding schooling, in the 1990s the logic of the market gained space: schools were transformed into goods acquired according to the capacity of consumption. Precisely from this logic, the interviewees in these schools seek to differentiate themselves in their discourses.

Also, these narratives that are pronounced against private education refer to Walzer’s remarks (1993). In his analysis of the spheres of justice, he argues that the unequal distribution of goods within the same sphere does not have to be objectionable, but that injustice arises when goods are converted into other goods, through a transgression of spheres. In the conception of Walzer, some may be richer than others; the problem is when that fortune serves to obtain, for example, a better education.

Also the Academic Pro-Secretary of the National University, whom we will call Liliana, referred to this point. By differentiating undergraduate schools from private schools, she pointed out:

Public education has for me this virtue of receiving what the State decides as a whole as education for the whole country, and the school is the State and lives within the State, as a citizen, and that is a good thing. There is no idea that is directing the formation of the student: there is no single idea. One could find private schools that are not religious but that embody a teaching paradigm. (...) a plural school prepares you for life (Liliana, UNLP Academic Pro-Secretary).

Thus, plurality stands out as one of the specific features that these schools differentiate from the private offer where there is, in their vision, a monolithic sense given to education. However, these schools also found a

unique definition of the type of “autonomous student” expected and the type of “critical” subjectivation to be shared unanimously by the consulted actors.

In the same way, Liliana indicated a material difference given by the inequality of resources:

We have infrastructure, we have positions, which is a big difference with the private one. Because my son finished primary school in a private secular school and there was no library. And it's a very good private school. And, when my son left, they started putting together a library ... there is no SCD [School Counseling Department]. It was contentious, classic. I had to take it out of normal X. I went to normal XX, but I had to take it out. The teacher sent me a note in a notebook and [the teacher] had 9 misspellings (...) then I took the boy in fourth grade. Then I tell you: [in the schools of the university] there are services, offer, personnel, which is neither in the private nor in the province (Liliana, UNLP Academic Pro-Secretary).

In that sense, the greater availability of resources available to undergraduate schools emerges as another characteristic that differentiates them from private schools. Likewise, it is interesting to stop, within Liliana's argument, at the crossroads between republican and egalitarian values and the interests around the education of her own son.

In the case of self-production and differentiation strategies in relation to provincial schools, the interviewees highlighted certain features of the undergraduate schools that operate as distinguishing factors.

A first distinctive characteristic of the group of undergraduate schools according to their teachers is that the school cycle begins after and ends before, but is, in its terms, of “better quality” in comparison with that of the provincial schools. In that sense, a teacher of Natural Sciences indicated:

[the student body] It is heterogeneous but those who graduate are always the same. This is not the province of Buenos Aires, here the kid has to make an effort, and sometimes they end up thinking: “If here is too demanding, I better go to the province they are not that demanding” (Teacher n ° 22, School 1).

In this way, these discourses construct these schools as more demanding of effort on the part of the students compared to the provincial ones. For her part, Juliana argued:

I have two students, their parents are Bolivians, and they come from the periphery: they were very good students in their schools, here they don't do well ... and also the whole issue of how that affects self-esteem. And those are their teachers, who made them know the possibility of this school ... (Juliana, director, school 1).

Certainly, her concern that some students who presented the best averages in a provincial school, in School 1 "is doing poorly" is related to the thesis that points to fragmentation (Kessler, 2002, Tiramonti, 2004, Núñez and Litichever, 2015) existing between educational establishments that consolidate as immeasurable and self-catered worlds. As Saraví (2015) shows, the educational system tends to a process of reciprocal exclusions and unequal inclusions that suppose that experiences are only linked to the known and between similar social sectors.

Also from School 2, a teacher indicated: "Because they are schools that are above the others, the level is higher. It is necessary that those who enter earn the place" (Teacher n° 18, school 2).

Returning to Oscar Aguilar, the elites are found in all areas in which it is possible to rank individuals according to certain criteria, and this hierarchy is based on a self-understanding of the elites as superiors (2011, page 205). In this case, the members of the university schools are considered superior to an external a priori homogeneous set.

Thus, in the educational imaginary of the interviewees, the undergraduate schools emerge as islands that promote high intensity schooling compared to "the rest" of public schools. Also the Extension Secretariat of School 2 referred to the educational quality that families seek in this School:

I think that the schools of the university are also, within the public, a curriculum, a way of educating you that still has a level, the level of education of the people who work there ... I also work in the faculty, and there it is that look of "if I encourage myself to work in secondary school, I will not work in any school, I will work in the schools of the university". It is that guarantee that there is scaffolding in the schools of the university (Nina, Secretary of Extension, School 2).

Thus, it is considered that the over-demand of these schools is related to the fact that they occupy a place of superiority in the educational imaginary of La Plata: in the choice of these establishments, the "choice of a good school" for the children is played. A second distinctive characteristic of this

group of schools is that they have a larger budget in comparison with the provincial ones. The director-elect at School 1 indicated in this regard:

It is true that we have more money than the rest: that is an objective material reality, especially in this last time there is more money. So that allows you to do more things, even allows you to be better aesthetically. My son, I have twins ... one goes to School 3, the first year, and another goes to the normal X. You go back to normal and it makes you want to take it out: the windows do not have glass, the doors do not have a handle, their blackboard... here the school is painted, the bathroom works, they have toilet paper, they have a new blackboard, they have fibron (Juliana, principal, school 1).

For its part, the Deputy Secretary of Academic Affairs of the University pointed out in this regard:

There is a basic difference between us and the province of Buenos Aires, which is the infrastructure ... the former secondary director [of the province] always told us: "I need a budget floor that I do not have". So that already makes a fundamental difference ... we do not have environmental problems, we do not have problems of resources, we do not have problems of internet services, we do not have problems connecting equality, and we have no problems! We have transportation scholarships, notes, food, charges, what problem do we have? We have support staff, we have an orientation department. Why do we have desertion? And I cannot stand it, I cannot bear that not everyone finish school, that they end up with empty benches (Liliana, Prosecretary of Academic Affairs UNLP).

The Prosecretary indicated her concern about the desertion, given that, unlike the situation in the province, in the undergraduate schools there have resources to prevent it.

A third particular feature of the undergraduate schools refers to the Academic Regime, specifically in terms of repetition: as of 2010, students may repeat only once, and then must change schools; restriction does not exist in provincial schools. In this way, the university schools are protected as quality ghettos, while ensuring the expulsion of repeating students. In the same sense, also since 2010, the repetition of students occurs when owing two "previous" subjects, and not three as it happens in provincial schools. These last two characteristics act together as a double path of legitimation. On the one hand, they collaborate with the legitimation of these institutions

as more demanding and of superior educational quality. On the other, with the legitimization of their graduates as winners who managed to overcome obstacles and demands that are greater in these schools than in the others. Fourth, in these schools there is greater freedom for pedagogical innovation. As Juliana pointed out:

And the freedom that gives you university autonomy, makes it possible to try these things that are simple devices, from accompanying devices ... have money and resources and possibility of having an extra-programmatic workshop, to do an interdisciplinary project without having to ask permission (Juliana, director, School 1).

In this way, she highlighted two of the characteristics that she understood as distinctive of this institution: on the one hand, the autonomy that allows innovation and experimentation and, on the other, the possession of resources, as has already been stated. In this sense, it is a school that holds a “discourse of itself” (Martínez, Villa, & Seoane, 2009, p. 50) in which it is projected as a “vanguard pedagogical” school. They consider themselves, together with the other undergraduate schools, as part of a “pedagogical elite”, in that they can experiment³ and even transfer successful experiences to provincial schools that have fewer resources and, therefore, less capacity to experiment and innovate. It should be added that School 1 is crossed by pedagogical experimentation as it is born linked to the ideas of Víctor Mercante, an exponent of Argentine positivism, and to the pedagogical section of the University of La Plata.

From the School 2, the head of the Department of Letters underlined the pedagogical superiority of the undergraduate schools:

Everyone wants to go to these schools. The important thing is to have the opportunity, because there are few quotas. Sometimes they bring things from other schools that are misconceptions. They come with “unimembre sentence”: that is not the perspective that we use here. The other schools are outdated (Teacher 7, School 2).

3 This freedom to experiment materializes in the existence of optional subjects, in the criterion of the computation of absences by subject and not by day, in the possibility of doing internships in the university, in the implementation of a system of prior subjects for promotion in the School 1, in interdisciplinary work (subjects that combine Literature and History or Geometry and Art), or in the creation of an academic block between first and second year in School 3.

Also, these schools are distinguished from “the others” because they are governed by the “pre-university system”, constituted by the existence of elective subjects in the last year; for the possibility of doing internships in the university and for the attendance regime computed by subject and not by day of classes:

There are articulations that we make children do with academic internships in the faculty, the whole subject of a flexible curriculum where they can choose subjects and workshops, that possibility of choice, the pre-university with those absence by subject ... (Nadia, outgoing Director, School 1).

In addition to the training in the possibility of putting together the course of subjects to be taken, the existence of options enables an “extended sociability” by promoting the mixture of students who, belonging to different divisions or courses, choose the same elective subjects according to their interests. In the emphasis placed on the possibility of choosing their own paths, the figure of the autonomous student reappears as that “type of ideal student”.

As Aguilar (2011) points out when defining the elite concept, it is about those who have been chosen and called to exert an influence greater than that of the rest of the individuals in a community. The author takes up the classical studies of the so-called theorists of the elites: Pareto, Mosca and Michels. Among the consulted actors, there is a narrative that holds that those who form part of these schools constitute a minority that has the function of directing the other schools. It would be a privileged group from the point of view of its ability to influence education by exporting successful experiences.

Finally, another distinguishing characteristic pointed out by the actors of these schools is the weight that disciplinary or departmental dynamics take on them. In that sense, the “departmental cultures” overlap the “school cultures” in both institutions.

To conclude, Obiols & Di Segni (1993) designate as “average schools” those that serve mostly children of parents with secondary or tertiary education and whose teachers usually have a non-university tertiary degree. In the case of these schools, these are students whose parents have completed or incomplete university education in 60% in school 1 and in 80% in School 2 and whose teachers have been trained in the university circuit. That is, they make up a differentiated educational fragment crossed by the university experience.

Hierarchies within the fragment: distances between School 1, School 2 and School 3

To the processes of production of hierarchies already analysed another one is superimposed: the one that takes place within the group of undergraduate schools.

The members of School 1 and 2 emphasize that the smaller size of these establishments constitutes them in “a more familiar space” than the one offered by School 3. In this sense, the director of School 2 positively valued the feeling of belonging to the institution:

There is a quite visible tradition in the conformation of the school registration that has to do with the fact that children of graduates come from the school. It is a school that generates a strong sense of belonging because of its institutional biography, its history, the networks (of affection, of coexistence) that are generated (Sonia, Director, School 2).

Thus, she pointed to a mechanism that shows a certain “hoarding of opportunities” (Tilly, 2000) in relation to the reiteration of children of graduates in school enrolment and also indicated that parents choose this school taking into account not only the educational quality, but what it implies as an institution that enables sociability and “networks” in a certain social sector of the city. On the other hand, the reiteration of surnames illustrates the weight of informal relations due to the low institutionalization of the access circuits to the elite in our country (Tiramonti & Ziegler, 2008). Although the draw cancels the direct action of informal networks, these are activated indirectly, from the circulation of information.

The specialty constitutes, on the other hand, the element that most clearly differentiates School 2, from an artistic modality, from the others that make up the group of undergraduate establishments. In the words of the brand new director of School 1:

School 2 has its defined artistic identity. So School 2 is music, it's plastic, it's exhibitions, violins, and School 3 is the school of the university, historical. We are always there in the middle; It seems to me that a particular identity is emerging in School 1, which has to do with being the most public and most popular school if you want ... (Juliana, Director, School 1).

There is a play in her words between self-perception and hetero-perception: to the extent that she distances herself from others she defines herself. In her vision it is, compared to the other two schools, the most similar to the provincial in terms of the composition of their enrolment, but in turn is distinguished from these by “offering a different variety” in relation to education.

The notions about the social sectors served constitute another point of distance, while it is considered that the art school attends a smaller percentage of disadvantaged sectors in comparison with School 1:

It makes the university have another place in the community, allows it to be a possibility for those who previously were not. In school 1 there is demand from vulnerable and immigrant sectors. In School 2, not so much, they are professional middle classes (Teacher 5, School 2).

To conclude, the “school culture” (Viñao Frago, 2002) in the addressed institutions is crossed by a common feature that refers to a selective tradition that some of its members claim from meritocratic views and others impugn from egalitarian visions of education. Likewise, the representation of a collective identity does not suppose but fictitiously the internal homogenization of the whole group. The imaginaries that are built on the others disguise the internal differences. Within this group of schools, Schools 1 and 2 would present a “more familiar space” and, among them, School 2 presents the characteristic that students choose to stay in the establishment in extracurricular time. The aspect that distinguishes School 2 from the others is the artistic specialty. With respect to the notions about the social sectors served, School 1 considers that it serves heterogeneous sectors while teachers indicate that the art school concentrates favoured groups. Finally, from School 2 a “discourse of yes” is maintained which indicates that it is there where the offer is more complete and where the most creative subjects are formed.

Overlapping hierarchies or the elite within the elite: inside the art school

Another process of differentiation that overlaps with the previous ones takes place between the two specialties offered by School 2. As we have

indicated, this secondary school of artistic modality enables two types of baccalaureate: Bachelor in Music and Bachelor in Visual Arts⁴.

When inquiring about the visions of the actors around the differences between the specialties, several referred to that “Visual Discourses” constitutes a more “easy” orientation than “Musical Discourses”: “Visual Discourses are easier. It is something that has to do with the demand. In easier to enter with that subject of the drawing “(Teacher n ° 32, school 2).

From these perspectives, the music specialty implies a higher degree of discipline compared to Visual Discourses. Another of the aspects that teachers indicated as distinctive of Visual Discourses was related to the group work that this specialty offers, in contrast to the individual work of those who must learn to master an instrument:

Being strict, music involves a lot more work. In Visual Discourses they socialize a lot, work with colleagues, and do manual work. In music you work alone, much longer. It is like a high performance sport (Teacher n ° 22, school 2).

Other arguments referred to that in the case of music was necessary, either to have studied an instrument previously, or to have “talent” to start it. Meanwhile, in Visual Discourses it was not necessary to know drawing techniques beforehand, but any person would be potentially trained or could develop those skills during schooling: “It’s more general, for music they have to have a real vocation for music. Everyone has a vein for manual art “(Teacher n ° 28, school 2).

In this way there is a hierarchy of music students of the school and musicians in general, thinking them as provided with a special talent, forming “the elite of the elite.” From this approach, artists are conceived as solitary and disciplined heroes.

In line with the above, when consulting the teachers in which orientation they find the best students, there is a certain coincidence that the music students are better: “Music is more demanding. It is another target, the Visual Discourses are more vague “(Teacher n ° 32, school 2).

4 At the same time, each orientation presents three types of specialty: Bachelor in Music (Guitar / Piano / Violin / Flute / Violoncello / Saxophone / Double Bass): Specialty Instrumental Production, Experimental or Artistic Socio-Community Composition; Bachelor of Visual Arts (Painting / Engraving / Sculpture): Project Production Specialty, Experimental or Artistic Socio-Community Composition.

In conclusion, the processes of self-legitimization by distancing multiply and overlap producing hierarchies even within institutions, from porous border negotiations. Specifically in the case of School 2 a set of hetero and self-perceptions is enabled, which results in that one of the specialties is considered superior since it is attributed greater difficulty, demand and rigor.

Discussion and conclusions

In this work we analysed the manufacturing processes of hierarchies and affirmation of distances with respect to “the others” present in a group of secondary schools dependent on National Universities in Argentina. As it has been shown, these institutions actively work in the legitimation through the distancing and subalternization of their “others” from the mobilization of criteria of symbolic classification. Thus, the reinforcement of hierarchies with respect to others reinforces their positioning in a place of superiority, giving rise to processes of self-legitimization by distance. It was analyzed, on the other hand, how these processes, far from being distributed according to the top-down dichotomy, multiply and juxtapose even within the same group of schools studied and also within the institutions. In that sense, it was shown that it is not a perfectly integrated monolithic body or a group that exerts superiority over other schools articulately but rather a field in dispute in which a “body spirit” is invoked (Bourdieu, 2013) whenever it is necessary to take distance from the provincial and private “other schools” in order to consolidate their elite place in the state sector of secondary education.

As Weber (1969) has indicated, inequality needs to be legitimized and this implies that those who occupy a place of superiority work towards making inequalities acceptable. The accumulation of previously developed categories allows conceiving the work carried out by the actors of these schools in order to differentiate themselves from the “others” and locate themselves in an elite place: the others can be private, provincial or other schools or specialties within the university.

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