

## **Teenagers and youth in school attrition in a marginalized urban area.**

### **Case study in two neighborhoods of the city of Tijuana.**

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#### **Abstract**

Currently, there are young people in Mexico facing a situation of school attrition and lack of job opportunities. This group of people is called ‘ninis’, and although it is not a theoretical category, this concept helps to understand and explain what is happening. In 2010, José Narro, president of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), stated the existence of about 7.5 million young people that don’t study nor work in this country (The term “nini” comes from joining 2 words in Spanish (Don’t = Ni), referring to people who ***don’t*** study and ***don’t*** work.

This paper addresses the phenomenon of school attrition and ninis from a qualitative approach. We present definitions of nini as well as recent statistical data on the situation of this group of people from an international, national and local perspective. The information was obtained by applying semi-structured interviews to understand the discourse of the social actors involved in the environment. It was possible to understand some of the community issues that allowed discussions, and that in turn helped in the design and proposal of some lines of intervention through these interviews.

## **Introduction**

According to the Mexican book *Los ninis, una generación sin rumbo* ("*Ninis, an aimless generation*", Estrada, 2010) there is a rhetorical comparison between the "lost boys" of the Peter Pan novel by James Matthew Barrie and young people who neither study nor work. They do not want to grow up; according to this statement, this could mean that they do not take responsibilities, are skeptical of some institutions and they are "hedonistic". That is, they disapprove of what society offers them. They do not identify with the ideas of family, education, work, religion, or any other long-term interest.

Many of these young people are able to work, but some choose not to become independent from their families. There are also young people living in social conditions of marginalization, discrimination and social exclusion. Therefore, this means that in many cases they do not have the opportunity to get a job.

The overall objective of this research is to understand the discourse of the inhabitants of the neighborhoods *El Niño* and *Valle Bonito* about school attrition and the youth educational environment. Other specific objectives of our research are to know how the social and educational environment is for young people in these neighborhoods and describe its context in relation to school attrition and ninis.

These objectives and problem statement originated the following research questions: What is the context of the *El Niño* and *Valle Bonito* neighborhoods in relation to school attrition? How is the social environment in these neighborhoods? and finally, what is the discourse of the inhabitants of *El Niño* and *Valle Bonito* on the ninis and school attrition?

## **Justification and problem definition**

In Mexico, nowadays there are more teenagers who are in situations that drive them away from a preparation for their future by not having access to education. This can cause Mexico's youth to limit their vision, not only for themselves but for the people who will be part of their family. It is considered that this phenomenon is intensified in marginalized areas (Pérez in Reguillo, 2010), within which the

neighborhoods *El Niño* and *Valle Bonito* can be found.

This phenomenon is not new and has many causes, since economic, educational, family and environment factors may intervene. According to the National Survey of Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud 2010 (IMJUVE for its spanish acronym), there are 36.2 million young people between 12 and 29 years old living in Mexico. Of these youth, in the range between 12-18 years old (still in school age) there are about 16 573 701 of which nearly two million teenagers are neither studying nor working.

It is also estimated that within Mexico, about three out of four teenagers who neither study nor work are women, and Mexico ranked third with youth between 12 and 29 years old who neither study nor work, among the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

In this topic, the OECD (in the State Run Educational System, 2010) presents some data of school attrition in the country, 22 out of 100 pupils leave school at elementary school level, on the way to junior high school another 10 dropout, and of the remaining 68 who continue studying only half will graduate. Upon entering high school an average of 10 more students will drop out, so that of the initial 100 students only 24 will conclude high school. Of these remaining students, 21 will start their higher education, but only 14 of them will graduate.

This data is disturbing, because it makes us question what happens to the young people who have left school and what is being done for them today.

## **Theoretical Background**

### **The origin of the concept of *nini* in Mexico**

The term *nini* refers to the segment of the population that is currently not working and not studying ("not" studying, "not" working), the majority of them being in school age. This term was introduced in Mexico for the first time in 2010 by the president of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), José Narro Robles, during the inauguration of the conference: *Values for the Contemporary Society*, at the Tlatelolco Cultural Center (El Economista, 2010). This concept corresponds to a phenomenon that is not only a social problem in Mexico because it is also occurring in other countries.

The concept does not have an agreed definition in the academic or journalistic field. In Pérez (Reguillo, 2010) *ninis* are identified as an upper-class young person that does not want to pursue anything by their own conviction. On the other hand, in Barbería (2009) and Reguillo (2010) it is considered to be a phenomenon related to the economic system and also, located in a work context that does not offer many alternatives for the youth. In addition, it is emphasized that these young people are available to work, but are "discouraged to have tried and failed to get any job" (Samaniego, 2010, 53). In general terms, they refer to young people who do not study and do not work, either by choice or because the lack of opportunity.

### ***The international situation***

During the *Mesa Redonda Latinoamérica 2012*, Narro said that in Latin America there are 35 million people who can not read or write and that there are 22 million young people who neither study nor work, meaning 1 out of every 5, and that if this was not reversed a "terrible and historic mistake" would take place (Rendón, 2010).

In addition, in english-speaking countries the term used to describe the same phenomenon is

NEET acronym for "Not in Employment, Education or Training" which was first used by the British government in the late eighties and its use has spread to other countries (Mascherini, 2012).

The amount of ninis and the situation in which they find themselves, are elements that are related to several factors: economic, social, political and cultural. Among these, for example, the unemployment rate is 5.14% in Mexico (INEGI, 2013), the educational offer, family relationships, and the existence of violent and criminal environments.

### ***Youth in the modern world***

The world today is characterized by an intensification of life; specifically about information and technological development. At this time, thinkers such as Bauman (2007), Lipovetsky (2008) and Beck (2009), among others, claim that the individual experiences a number of difficulties associated with individuality and little connection to *others* and their environment. They also believe that school and family, as well as other institutions, are in a series of crises or risks which, although already observed in the past, are now intensified. People have weaker links with these institutions, and individualization is a risk threatening against the sense of community and participation. Therefore, the educational work experiences other difficulties.

In terms of Risk Society (Beck, 2009), individuals have little faith in what the school can provide them as a space for knowledge and training. School is commonly thought from its instrumental sense: "study to get a job". And the problem of school attrition is a phenomenon that comes from this disconnection between school, family and life project.

For the characteristics of this time, it is important to understand the difference between educating for the technical sense of education or educating with a social responsibility. School should not function as an institution that "recruits", but as a space in which knowledge, values and where students acquire some autonomy can socialize. The educational project should take into account that everyone can participate in the resolution of problems, both personal and collective (Escámez, 2003).

Overall, taking into account the environment of an increasing individualization and the lack of opportunities, the young adult living in marginal urban areas, is at a clear disadvantage.

## **Methodology**

For the purposes of this research, a methodology of qualitative approach was applied in which a study model based on the research done in *La generación nini* was used. *Los hijos de la precariedad* (*The nini generation. The children of precariousness*, Linares et al, 2012), in Cetys Universidad. The instrument used is a semistructured questionnaire based on different categories and research focused questions. This questionnaire was adapted to young people who left school in two marginal urban areas of Tijuana as well as students in Junior High School who knew the context. It was also applied to parents, teachers and community leaders, among others. The content of the interview instrument is as follows:

Introductory questions and the respondent's demographic data.

Characteristics of the relationships within the family (activities, traditions, communication, etc.).

Perspective towards School (both from the father and the young adult).

Perspective towards Work (both from the father and the young adult).

Social integration.

Violence, drug sale and consumption.

Search for groups and alternative spaces.

Perspectives of their life

Open comments by the informant.

This instrument was also adapted to apply it to focus groups. Individual interviews were conducted with teenagers who left school and do not work, parents, police, teachers, religious leaders and the community in general.

In the *El Niño* neighborhood there were two focus groups and 33 individual interviews. In total 12 ninis, 1 student, 3 mothers, 11 key informants, and 6 teachers were interviewed. In the *Valle Bonito* neighborhood 36 people were interviewed, 20 are young adults: 3 of them are ninis, 2 men and 1 woman, plus 16 adults, among which 7 are parents.

Moreover, as complementary techniques, observation was carried out, keeping a field diary and photographic record.

The steps used to know and understand the information yielded by the participants were the following:

1. Gather information through interviews and focus groups.
2. Capture, transcribe and organize the evidence.
3. Encode information according to a color for each category.
4. Analyze and interpret results.

## **Description of the study spaces**

### **Tijuana**

The city of Tijuana has more than 19 million tourists crossing the border with the United States, representing an average of 50 000 visitors per day. It also has a floating or semi-floating population composed of people seeking employment opportunities in the United States.

The influence of different historical events has led to the continuous population growth of the city, which now has 1 559 000 people (INEGI, 2013). The city has 46 marginalized areas, in which almost 526 000 people live. Because of the rapid growth, the government is unable to provide the

necessary services, so it is very common to find people protesting in some government institutions: water, electricity, drainage, paving and formal education.

### ***Valle Bonito and El Niño neighborhoods***

These neighborhoods are considered to be in marginalization, due to the lack of paving, health centers, drainage, and other basic services such as telephone or street lighting in almost every street. They also have lots and irregular settlements, reason why many families with a mid-low income living in the community have suffered from evictions.

*Valle Bonito* has a total population of 595 inhabitants, of whom 279 are women and 316 are men. It has a total of approximately 169 homes. Meanwhile, *El Niño* has a total population of 5526 inhabitants, of which 2 782 are male and 2 744 female (INEGI, 2013).

The houses are mostly built with concrete blocks and materials that they have reused, such as tents for their patios, pieces of wood, tires, cardboard, among others. Both neighborhoods have existed for approximately 20 years and have been populated by people from other states from Mexico who have emigrated motivated by the lack of jobs in their hometowns. *El Niño* for example, has its origin in a formal eviction conducted by authorities in another area of greatest risk, due to the damage caused by the weather phenomenon of the same name.

With regard to public services, in this area there is no piped water, paving, public transport, sports facilities and shopping centers. It is common to find the following things in their backyards: piles of dirty laundry, clotheslines, plastic containers where they store water they bought from water supply in cars and no street lighting. This situation is described by one of the elementary school teachers: "Children seem to sleep with the uniform, come with their clothes wrinkled and dirty, there are problems with lice, and they do not bathe very often" (Ana, elementary school teacher, 23 years old).

Most houses are unfinished concrete constructions, others are made with materials and waste: wood, cardboard or fences made out of old tires. They also have a constant problem with garbage



collection because they do not have this service, which causes people to have to resort to burning it, or pay to have someone else in the community take it to the dump.

As for the educational offer of the inhabitants, they only have access to public elementary school and secondary schools, as high schools and other educational centers are located at great distances from the neighborhoods.

## **Results**

### **School attrition as something that "just happens"**

The families of the community have few spaces for living, due to long working hours, which affects young people both in their school performance and in the sense they give to school. In this regard Professor Ileana Revilla, who is commissioned as director of the *Telesecundaria*<sup>1</sup> #115 of *Valle Bonito*, made mention of some recent cases of school attrition. She emphasizes the relationship between school attrition with the lack of support from parents as well as the problems experienced within households. Jasmin, another teacher, narrates her experience:

In this neighborhood, parents only work to support their family and it is not something they do by choice but by necessity. They are forced to work long shifts with little pay as taxi or bus drivers, in factories or tending animals, causing inattention to their children and therefore, offering them only about 50 percent of their attention. (Elementary school teacher, *Valle Bonito*).

According to Beck (2009) attrition and dropout are phenomena that stem from the disconnection between school, family and life project. Therefore, communication within households and the importance given to education are essential:

Family dysfunction is due to working long hours in factories and the low priority given to the school because then parents are asked to collaborate constantly, they prefer to say: I think he/she

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<sup>1</sup> Is a education model created in 1968. In order to impart secondary education through television broadcasts, in rural or difficult to access in Mexico and to diminish illiteracy prevailing.

will need to leave school (Ramiro, Director of elementary school, *Valle Bonito neighborhood*).

This encourages youth to leave school, "I do not know if I'll go to high school, since we almost have no money, and you need to pay to go to high school" (Ezekiel, 17 years old, *Valle Bonito*).

Some of the youth interviewed said that they do not feel supported by the teacher, and that for "any reason" they send behavior reports or simply suspend them. "I was expelled because the teacher scolded me and I insulted him" (Victor, 22 years old, nini, *Valle Bonito*). By raising the issue of expulsion teacher Jasmin says: "The whole context influences for a teenager to become a nini, although the school has a certain percentage of fault, because sometimes instead of supporting students, sometimes they push them away into perdition".

In both neighborhoods, several informants said that they did not study because there were no places available for them. Thus, they also relate this factor to the non-continuity of education:

I only finished the first year of high school because we moved from where we lived and when we got here I wanted to enroll but there were no places available in school, so I lost a year and the next year I did not go because I had already lost a year, so what was the point? (Isidro, 15 years old, works by filling jugs of water, *El Niño*).

As an important note, some respondents reported not having documents accrediting them as Mexican citizens. This, it is said, is because by not going to the hospital and giving birth to their children at home, parents do not go to the Civil Registry. Constant migration is also involved, people do not change the legal status of children and constantly change region. So, some children do not even enter school.

### **1. Social environment has few recreational options for the youth**

These colonies were considered within the most violent marginalized urban settlements in Tijuana (Navarro, 2012) and although it has declined, the inhabitants say that robberies, assaults, and drug consumption are common and also claim that there is little oversight by the municipal police, "There

is a lot of vandalism, in the morning it is quiet but at night they are always robbing. I have not been robbed, but I heard that last month they killed a lady" (Karen, 17 years old, Nini, *El Niño*).

According to the testimony of informants, it is common that some young people start using illegal drugs at an early age: "When I was 11, I was uncontrollable, at age 15 my mom took me to rehab [...] I started with marijuana, after that I also inhaled spray. I stole things and sold them to buy the drug. (Fernando, 17 years old, Nini, *Valle Bonito*).

The "Fields", as the meeting place for many of the youth of *El Niño* is called, where leading football teams are defined but also where they accept new members to *El Niño* groups. In some cases they are hit to become part of the "group": Here in the neighborhood, if you're new, you have to get into a fight with someone else from the group so you can enter the gang" (José Ángel, 19 years old, *El Niño*).

In the case of *Valle Bonito*, the meeting point is on the street, outside a grocery store. Here they offer the sale of cigarettes, beer, hot dogs and loud music with songs of the *grupero*/band genre. Others mention they meet to smoke marijuana.

## **2. Lack of parental presence in the home: long shifts**

According to the statements, it is possible to identify that the lack of parental presence causes some situations that affect the family environment. Some teachers commented that parents, especially single parents, work long work shifts in places distant of their home:

There are many dysfunctional families, single mothers, boys with problems at home, that the father is unemployed or that they are living with relatives rather than with parents and you can see the lack of interest of parents in taking over the boy. The single parent who works does not see them all day, they say they bring their child to us for us to educate him. (Professor of Electronics and Maintenance in CECYTE high school in *El Niño*).

In both neighborhoods, the interviewed people reported little parental involvement in the

education of their children. The interviewed youth mentioned the difficulties this posed to them, and even though they understood the economic situation of their parents, they complained about the absence of attachment and affection and lack of communication with family members.

Also, the lack of privacy or having their own room are common aspects for small spaces in the home, as the case of Jacqueline, a 15 years old young woman, who lives in a room of 4 square meters with her mother and her 3 brothers:

I borrowed this little room, here we sleep my two younger kids and my two grown children, is a bit tricky because they are growing up, but I do not pay rent and that helps me a lot right now that I'm alone sustaining my children (Lucia, Jacqueline's mom, *Valle Bonito*).

### **3. Lack of financial resources**

Many young people do not continue their studies due to the lack of resources and the need to support household expenses. On one hand, some parents want fast money inputs, therefore they do not focus their children into school, but to work. This situation leads young people to not want to study nor work: "we are five in the house, do you think they can send me to study too?, I feel as if I don't give money to the house, at least I do not take, perhaps only food, so I am in no hurry of finding a job" (Uriel, 21, has not worked in six years, *El Niño*). And they also have to prioritize: "I wanted to study high school but my mom was single and I had five brothers and she gave my sister a chance." (María Guadalupe, 21, a housewife, *El Niño*).

### **4. Work**

In both neighborhoods there are few job offers. There are family businesses as tortilla shops, water purification shops, Internet cafes, and swap meets. In regards to large companies, the only regional retail market they have is Calimax, which provides some jobs for the community. There are temporary jobs in the construction of houses and blocks and bricks manufacturing. But in some of these

companies there were jobs until they began to increase the studies requirements for workers:

Right now, companies no longer allow minors to work for them. Previously, they let them work if they had their parental permission, but not now. That's why many do not work. Since she used to work before, but job demand decreased and she got fired and it is very hard to get a job because she is a minor. For example Mattel, used to allow minors to work but not now. (Teresa Gaspar, nini, mother, *El Niño*).

As for the most common jobs, most people work in the factories and for this you need to go out of the neighborhood. The wages of new workers for assembly operations which is what is usually available, range from 67 pesos to 130 pesos per day, which is equivalent to about \$5.5 and \$10 American dollars respectively.

## **5. Drug addiction, consumption and sales**

According to the youth, teachers, parents and social workers: It is common to use drugs like marijuana and cocaine in these neighborhoods. They indicated that there is sale and consumption, and that in some houses young people who are not studying even grow marijuana.

One of the secondary teachers said that the problems faced by students at home are family dysfunction, drugs, vandalism and lack of leisure, which result in young people with behavioral problems or self-esteem issues.

Although some young people mentioned not being aware of drug use or vandalism, others, even though they do not consume it, they have observed the consumption: "I know marijuana because a neighbor planted it at his home and consumed it, he would go crazy" (José, 16 years old, *Valle Bonito*). Some even mentioned that their parents are drug consumers or merchants. Rosaura, psychologist, explains why the drug trade is attractive:

Leaders who are presented to young people with a cigar in their hand, good clothes, drinking beer, wearing brand clothes or driving fancy cars, make them believe that they are valuable for what

they have and not for what they are, thus becoming potential targets for those who offer easy money.

## **6. Perspectives of life**

Most of the people interviewed did not have a perspective on life and school was meaningless. When asked whether they would continue studying, the common response was, "*perhaps I will keep studying*" or "*I do not know*". This is consistent with that seen in Beck (2009), because it questions distrust in institutions as a social risk. Here it is disclosed, apparently, with disinterest on the school or vocational guidance.

This gives guidelines to discuss the concept of *nini*. Since not only the youth who neither study nor work presents life prospects blurred: there are young people who were studying, but not stated whether or not they wanted to continue their studies or seek a job. Rosaura (DIF psychologist) mentions that the vision of parents is entirely related to the perspectives of the parents to their children.

Some parents expressed the desire for their children to study, but also confessed not knowing how to discipline them or "get them back to school." In general, the discourse of the people is oriented toward frustration, but in general it is oriented toward apathy for school or work. Young people were not always able to express what their situation was, or what they want to do in the future.

## **Proposals**

From the above results, it is considered that in both neighborhoods it is necessary to carry out programs for youth where they can develop their skills and improve their abilities. We can conclude, by the evidence, that there are no options for entertainment and culture, in addition to school. Thus, it may be tempting to use and sell drugs:

Some of these actions may be:

- Organization of sports activities and implement facilities for it. Arrange competitions that foster

teamwork and the pursuit of local and regional recognition.

- Homework Club. Informal organizations to study and for young people to help others to read, make operations and projects related to school, but not necessarily with a fixed schedule or evaluations. This is a friendly way to integrate young people and the community.
- Provide professional development that encourages instructors to establish positive relationships with their students.
- Implement school field trips to local museums, local attractions and others places to enhance the schoolwork.
- Provide more opportunities for students to visit higher education institute to socialize and connect with other students by organizing fairs and exhibitions of school projects.
- Health campaigns. The ideal thing would be not only to conduct periodic reviews or provide contraception, but to have experts in the field provide sexual education and nutritional guidelines, which were the most frequently mentioned problems.
- If the law defines that basic education is a right and this is not happening in all cases, then it takes some updates and law enforcement to formalize the obligations of parents to fulfill this right. In other countries, there are penalties for them and help from social workers.
- It is preferable that the teachers know their students history file. Each student has a record in their school and that educational authorities are responsible for the continuity of education. This way, the teachers of each new school year, will have information to improve the teaching process.
- Attention from the authorities is missing in the design of public transport routes, especially to facilitate arrival at school. This would help students to not have to walk long distances or spend the little money they have in transportation.
- It is necessary to generate opportunities for part-time jobs or weekends jobs for young people so that they can continue with their studies and bring money home.
- Some mentioned not having a birth certificate, and therefore were not enrolled in any school. Authorities are required to extend legal services for these people, and perhaps for some seasons they could go to these sites to register minors.

- Finally, it is recognized that these neighborhoods are found in marginal areas of a city that has an intense economic activity and is considered as a multicultural metropolis. They are rarely mentioned in the government development plans.
- In this way, the department of social development should create a program to help the marginalized neighborhoods in the city to have their properties legalized and so that the government includes these types of areas in their social programs.
- Therefore, we propose that the teaching training includes instruction on the context in which schools are embedded as teachers are key to encouraged the development of such areas.

After understanding the problems the youth is going through in these communities, further action is considered as urgent. Existing measures have been successful, but not all the people know about the situation or are not involved. Also in other communities with problems in school, lack of opportunities and marginalization similar proposals or statements can be made. This is important because the current generation is also the generation that will have the role of education in the future.



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