ITS06 – Education

General outline:

1. The development of the sociology of education in a context of expansion of schooling
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3. Gender and racial/ethnic inequalities in education
   A. Gender inequalities in education
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1. The development of the sociology of education in a context of expansion of schooling

A. **The context: the expansion of schooling and its growing social role**
   • The expansion of schooling in France throughout the XXth century:
     • Compulsory education until age 13 (1882), 14 (1936), 16 (1967)
     • An example: the changing status of the Baccalauréat (Selz and Vallet, 2006):
       • Among people born between 1920 and 1922, 15% of men and 9% of women reached the « Bac » or beyond (higher education diploma)
       • Among people born between 1974 and 1976, 59% of men and 67% of women reached the « Bac » or beyond
   • Growing role of the school:
     • In the socialization of individuals
• In the definition of social status → hence important focus of the sociology of education on social inequalities

B. Education and social mobility

Distinction between educational and social opportunity

• Inequality of educational opportunity (unequal access to different levels of education depending on one’s social background)
• Inequality of social opportunity (unequal access to different socio-occupational categories depending on one’s social background)

Boudon, 1974: Decreasing inequality of educational opportunity does NOT entail decreasing inequality of social opportunity (Anderson’s paradox: a higher level of education does not necessarily increase social mobility: one may have a higher diploma and lower social position than one’s father)

• Why? Aggregation effect: individuals seek a higher diploma in order to improve their social status, but since all individuals act similarly and more and more people have access to higher diplomas, the value of each diploma in terms of social status decreases


C. Sociological theories of education

• Until the 1970s: focus on the role of schools as agents of socialization and integration → the reproduction of society
  • Focus on the reproduction of « common values »: Durkheim, Parsons
  • Focus on the reproduction of social conflict/social hierarchies: Baudelot, Establet, Bourdieu, Passeron
• The school as a « space for actors’ strategies »
  • Opening the « black box » of the school: how teachers behave and make sense of their work, how class interactions unfold, what goes on at recess, how students experience the school…
  • Stressing the reflexivity of individual actors: family strategies
  • Role of education policies
→ « School inequalities are not the necessary and structural product of the functioning of a school which would be meant to this aim, but results from struggles between social groups in order to maintain their advantages » (Duru-Bellat and Van Zanten, 2012, p.254).

2. How does education contribute to the reproduction of class inequalities?

A. The inheritors (1964): taking a close look at Bourdieu and Passeron’s seminal theory of social reproduction

Focus on higher education
• Probability of access to university according to parents’ occupational category
A process of «elimination»: «A senior executive’s son is 80 times more likely to enter a university than a farm worker’s son» (p.2)

Presence does not mean equality:

« [...] even at the level of higher education, one still finds differences in attitude and ability that are significantly related to social origin, although the students whom they differentiate have all undergone fifteen or twenty years of the standardizing influence of schooling, and although the most underprivileged of them have only escaped elimination thanks to their greater adaptability or to a more favorable family environment » (Bourdieu, Pierre and Jean-Claude Passeron. 1979 [1964]. The inheritors. French students and their relation to culture. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.8).

Feeling «at home» or «out of place» in school (p.13)

Where does this (upper-class) feeling of being «at home» in the university come from?

Feeling «at home» in school as a result of cultural privilege:

« Not only do the most privileged students derive from their background of origin habits, skills and attitudes which serve them directly in their scholastic tasks, but they also inherit from it knowledge and know-how, tastes, and a «good taste» whose scholastic profitability is no less certain for being indirect. «Extra-curricular» culture, (la culture «libre»), the implicit condition for academic success in certain disciplines, is very unequally distributed among students from different backgrounds, and inequality of income does not suffice to explain the disparities which we find. Cultural privilege is manifest when it is a matter of familiarity with works which only regular visits to theaters, galleries and concerts can give (visits which the school does not organize, or only sporadically). It is still more manifest in the case of those works, generally the more modern ones, which are the least «scholastic»» (ibid., p.17).

How do members of the upper class acquire this cultural privilege?

The discrete transmission of cultural privilege in the higher classes:

«Privilege is only noticed, most of the time, in its crudest forms of operation – recommendations or connections, help with schoolwork or extra teaching, information about education and employment. But, in fact, the essential part of a cultural heritage is passed on more discretely and more indirectly, and even in the absence of any methodological effort or overt action. It is perhaps in the most «cultivated» backgrounds that there is least need to preach devotion to culture or deliberately to undertake initiation into cultural practices. In contrast to the petit-bourgeois milieu, where most of the time the parents can only transmit cultural good intentions, the cultivated classes contrive diffuse incitements that are much more likely to induce espousal of culture through a sort of hidden persuasion» (ibid., p.20).

The lower classes rely on the school as purveyor of culture, when schools themselves denigrate school culture and value a form of culture produced in the homes of the upper classes.
« For individuals from the most deprived backgrounds, the school remains the one and only path to culture, at every level of education. As such, it would be the royal road to the democratization of culture if it did not consecrate the initial cultural inequalities by ignoring them and if it did not – for example, by denigrating a piece of academic work as too « academic » - often devalue the culture it transmits, in favor of the inherited culture which does not bear the vulgar mark of effort and so has every appearance of ease and grace.

[...] All teaching, and more especially the teaching of culture (even scientific culture), implicitly presupposes a body of knowledge, skills, and above all, modes of expression which constitute the heritage of the cultivated classes » (ibid. p.21).

• Hard work (petite-bourgeoisie) vs ease (elite)

« The reversal of the scale of values which, by inverting the signs, transforms seriousness into the « spirit of seriousness » and the valuing of work into a trivial, laborious pedantry suspected of making up for a lack of talent, takes place as soon as the petit-bourgeois ethos is judged from the standpoint of the ethos of the « elite », that is, measured against the dilettantism of the cultivated, well-born gentleman who knows without having struggled to acquire his knowledge and who, secure about his present and future, can afford detachment and risk virtuosity. But the culture of the elite is so close to the culture taught in school that a child from a petit-bourgeois background (and a fortiori from a peasant or working-class background) can only laboriously acquire that which is given to a child from the cultivated class – style, taste, sensibility, in short, the savoir-faire and art of living that are natural to a class because they are the culture of that class. For some, the learning of elite culture is a conquest paid for in effort, for others, it is a heritage, which implies both facility and the temptations of facility » (ibid. p.24).

• « gifts » and merit are in fact cultural habits by valuing gift and merit, the school system in fact ensures the perpetuation of social privilege and inequalities

« [...] the abilities measured by scholastic criteria stem not so much from natural « gifts » [...] but from the greater or lesser affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system or the criteria which define success within it » (ibid. p.22).

« The educational system can, in fact, ensure the perpetuation of privilege by the mere operation of its own internal logic. [...] the university system [consecrates] inequalities by transforming social privilege into individual gifts or merit » (ibid. p.27).

B. Social reproduction and education: empirical and theoretical refinements and critiques of Bourdieu and Passeron’s analysis

a) Empirical update

Later empirical works confirm and specify the role of education in the reproduction of social inequalities:

• Ex. : social inequalities in schooling trajectories following entry into junior high school (6ème)

Situation, in 2001, of students who have entered junior high school (6ème) in 1995 (%):
The inheritors put into historical perspective: How is the link between social origin and diploma evolving?

Evolution of the intensity of the link between social origin and diploma from one generation to the other (cohorts born 1919-1928 to 1959-1968)


b) Main criticisms levelled at Bourdieu and Passeron’s theory of social reproduction through schooling

> Questioning the role of cultural heritage (high-brow culture)

What is at stake in « cultural capital »?

- Studies shows that social inequalities impact scholarly outcomes at a very early stage of education (in learning the basis of reading, writing and calculus) → cf delays in entering junior high school (entrée en 6ème):

Delays in junior high school entry according to social class
What matters most is not so much a proximity to high-brow culture than reading and speech habits and educational practices at home → fostering linguistic and cognitive capacities (De Graaf, 2000; Sullivan, 2001; Lareau, 2003; Duru-Bellat and Fournier, 2007)

Stressing people’s reflexivity:

- The role of outcome anticipation in schooling choices: a rational choice perspective on school decisions (Boudon, 1973):
  - Methodological individualism: taking individuals choices and anticipations as the starting point
  - Studying families’ and students’ class-situatet anticipations regarding schooling outcomes

  « […] it is assumed (1) that people behave rationally in the economic sense… but that (2) they also behave within decision fields whose parameters are a function of their position in the stratification system » (Boudon, 1974, p.36)

- Ex. In working-class students’ anticipations, an extra year of post-compulsory education represents a higher (relative) financial cost and a higher risk of failure than for upper-class students, whereas it appears less essential in terms of status preservation or enhancement. → dropping-out can as a rational choice

  « [Inequality of educational opportunity] is generated by a two-component process. One component is related mainly to the cultural effects of the stratification system. The other introduces the assumption that even with other factors being equal, people will make different choices according to their position in the stratification system » (Boudon, 1974, p.36)

→ 2 effects of social stratification on educational inequality (cf Thompson and Simmons, 2013, p.750-751)

  Primary effect: impact of social background on school performances (cf Bourdieu’s analysis)

  Secondary effect: effect of the educational choices made by children from differing social backgrounds but with similar levels of performance
• The active role of parents’ mobilization around school-related issues (Van Zanten, 2001, 2009, Oberti, 2007)
• Choice of the school / school flight → interactions between urban segregation and school segregation
• Guidance in the choice of the course of study

• Questioning the assumption of a generalized belief in meritocracy: who actually believes in it? (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2009)
• Role of meritocracy in legitimating the reproduction of social inequalities = key aspect of Bourdieu and Passeron’s argument: 2 assumptions:
  • People recognize the school’s primary role in identifying and recognizing individual merit
  • People believe that individual scholarly achievements are solely based on merit/natural gifts, and have nothing to do with class (a naturalization of social hierarchies that involves symbolic violence for the lower classes, and reinforces the legitimacy of social inequalities)
• Empirical investigation on people’s perceptions of meritocracy (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2009) show that:
  • Merit is deeply interiorized as a principle, but not necessarily linked to school merit
    • Students believe diploma is important, but not the only determinant in individual job outcomes; 45% of them believe it plays too important a role
    • 60% agree that higher education should be rewarded by higher pay (→ not a universal belief)
    • Skepticism regarding school’s capacity to reward merit: 55% of students believe school rewards individual capacitie
  • People generally acknowledge the role of social class: 72% of students believe that parents’ social environment influences scholarly outcomes
    → Schooling also favors critical thinking about meritocracy

• The relative autonomy of the school system: how schools contribute to the production of « ease »
  S.R. Khan, 2011, Privilege. The making of an adolescent elite at St. Paul’s school
  • Corporal ease as a mark of social privilege
  • Learning ease during the high school years
    « Rather than be forced to learn formal rules of etiquette, students learn to be comfortable around such elite tastes and sensibilities and, more often than not, even be indifferent to them. The students at seated meals are not uncomfortable in their formal attire, nor are they anxious about eating dinner with faculty members. In fact, the event is a non-event to them. […] And this ease – which, it turns out, is far more valuable than merely revering and producing expertise – is what students at St. Paul’s learn at seated meal and everywhere else » (p.80).

3. Gender and racial/ethnic inequalities in education

A. Gender inequalities in education
Stability in social inequalities vs gender inequalities are transforming: girls catching up and surpassing boys…

- Among people born between 1920 and 1922, 15% of men and 9% of women reached the « Bac » or beyond (higher education diploma)
- Among people born between 1974 and 1976, 59% of men and 67% of women reached the « Bac » or beyond (Selz and Vallet, 2006)

… Yet girls continue to opt in favor of less promising options (Duru-Bellat et al., 2003)

Gender segregation in higher education in France:

![Graph showing gender segregation in higher education](http://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/2012/86/0/DEPP-filles-garcons-2012_209980.pdf)

Main sociological explanations:

Gendered socialization unfolding in a gendered educational context…

- Primary socialization/primary and secondary education:
  - core gender role beliefs and status biases (ambivalent effects at the level of primary/secondary schooling): confidence/sense of one’s worth/taste for competition/compliance to behavioral school expectations (Baudelot and Establet 1992)
  - Gendered stereotypes in school pedagogy (Mosconi, 1989)
- Secondary socialization/higher education:
  - Core gender role beliefs still at work (confidence, self-assessment, taste for competition)
  - Gendered higher education contexts (ex. STEM)

… Resulting in gendered anticipations

- Girls’ choices, taking into account the job opportunities open to them and their future roles of wives and mothers (Duru-Bellat, 1990)
- « Professional role confidence » (Cech, Rubineau, Silbey, & Seron, 2011).

**B. Ethnic/racial inequalities in education**

- In the US: differences in Blacks and Whites’ scholarly outcomes decreased in the 1960s and 1970s, and increased again in the 1990s
• In France: more and more studies of differences of scholarly outcomes between children of migrants and children of « natives »
• Socio-economic factors explain most of these inequalities (socio-occupational category, level of diploma of the parents, number of siblings, etc.)
• Yet some « net » inequalities remain: ex. Ichou, 2013

« Net » differences in scholarly outcomes in the first year of elementary school (CP) and in the first (6ème) and last (3ème) years of junior high school, between children of migrants and children of natives (reference group) (Ichou, 2013):

[Graphique 4. - Différences « nettes » de résultats scolaires en CP, 6è et 3è entre les groupes d’enfants d’immigrés et les enfants de natifs (groupe de référence)]


2 main trends of explanation for the inequalities that persist even after « controlling for » other socio-economic characteristics (Safi, 2013):
• Cultural mechanisms
  • Cultural deprivation
  • Oppositional culture (ex. African-American kids with good grades who get accused of « acting white » by their peers)
  • Effect of the experience of racism \(\rightarrow\) interiorization of stereotypes
• School context and « invisible discriminations »
  • Teachers’ attitudes and expectations
  • Segmentation of academic fields and courses of study
  • Interactions between school segregation and urban segregation

4. References

