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Recent advances in sociology of education research : which facts for which theories ?

In the field of education research as in others ones, comparative investigations have proven fruitful. But they have often taken place within distinct networks (for instance, European Conferences for Sociological Research versus European Conference for Educational Research ones, EQUALSOC versus “School Effectiveness” research...). The issues investigated prove quite different, and also the theoretical references.

Among the former, the following issues are the most common :

- comparing the process of democratisation across countries (Shavit and Blossfeld, Erikson and Jonsson, ...),
- the reproduction of social inequalities (with a strong influence of the sociology of social mobility, we may quote Goldthorpe, Breen, Vallet),
- the relationships between school and work (Shavit and Müller)...

Among educational researchers, the most common issues are :

- the part played by the characteristics of the educational systems in differences in achievement between countries, on the basis of data such as PISA (with researcher as Crahay, myself and Suchaut...),
- issues such as unequal effectiveness of schools or pedagogical methods (with Scheerens, van Damme...),
- some macro (and comparative) analysis of the relationships between education and social cohesion or other global outputs (Green and al., 2003).

Each of those two points of view sheds light on different mechanisms. The question is : how can we hold simultaneously what those two separate fields of research uncover ? Trying to elaborate a synthetic overview of those different trends is worthwhile because the accumulation of empirical facts and regularities has obviously some theoretical implications. It's also worthwhile to strive to articulate what comparative research stresses as important, and what national and local studies underlines; that's because the former leads to focus on what varies from one countries to another and in the same way to neglect what is common to all of them.

1. To day, the prevalent view in the comparative sociology of education may be schematically summarized as follows.

In line with the sociology of social mobility, it focuses upon the length of the schooling career or upon the highest level of education achieved¹. To understand how the schooling career is generated, the rational action theory is mobilised, the key concepts being choices, strategies, etc... It heuristically stresses the importance of unequal choices in systems differently organized as far as branching points and selection patterns are concerned (Goldthorpe, 1996). And what Müller calls the “survival pattern” becomes a key factor to understanding the generating of social inequalities.

But with this focussing upon the schooling career, and also because comparative research necessarily focuses on what varies from one country to another, it neglects the academic attainment strictly speaking : what pupils know and which social inequalities in this respect.

Those remain important in every country, even if the dominance of Boudon’s theory leads them to be considered only as “primary effects”.

Actually, we know that social inequalities in school career terms may be attributed in equal measure to inequalities in school attainment and inequalities stemming from the type of education pupils choose (Erikson and Jonsson, for Sweden, my own research for France). Even if the former (inequalities in school attainment) are becoming less and less important while schooling careers are expanding, taking those primary effects seriously is all the more important because several empirical studies do show they steadily accumulate from the very beginning of schooling.

So it’s important to understand how those inequalities of attainment are generated, far from only evoking the umbrella term of “cultural inheritance” ... That’s what some national studies do. For instance, Sullivan or de Graaf succeed in giving an operational significance to the concept of cultural inheritance by considering the precise resources pupils inherit from their

¹ Let’s note that so doing, one ratifies implicitly the conception of education as a positional good (a good that will be used to get the best rank in the file for job), more than a good in itself.

parents and then turn to good account at school. It proves that it's not high brow culture which matters but rather customary practices such as reading or watching television, through which children learn some vocabulary or various kinds of knowledge. Moreover, through those practices, parents would not only develop linguistic and cognitive skills but would also develop an environment more in affinity with school. And de Graaf (and others) underlines that the social inequalities of achievement may vary to country to country according to the weight of "high brow" culture in the programs, hinting so that school may matter and making so an interesting suggestion to comparative sociologists...

But it remains that in the broad mainstream of comparative sociological research, school (that is its contents, its pedagogical practices) doesn't matter; or not as much as the way it's organized (stratification, branching points); the latter is considered important because its acts upon the decision of pupils, but, again, as far as schooling career is concerned rather than attainment strictly speaking... Pupils, how they behave and the choices they make would be the most important thing, within a school system that is only a framework.

2. In educational sciences, what is at stake is to underline the impact of the school itself.

This orientation results partly from the fact that researchers in that field are more often actors themselves (especially teachers), so they feel more concerned with what pupils learn or with what goes on in classes.

One of the oldest fields explored is school effectiveness research (cf. Scheerens, 2000); it uncovers which educational factors peculiar to the school (or to the teacher) tends to result in a high level of effectiveness (that is better attainment for pupils of given personal characteristics). More recently, some databases such as TIMSS, PISA have given a lot of possibilities for comparing social inequalities of attainment between countries, and for linking them to some structural or organizational characteristics of the educational systems, or with some macro social parameters (Gini index, indicators of social cohesion...).

What all this research shows is :

- 1) there exist social inequalities of achievement in every country, but the importance of those social inequalities does vary from one country to another; in PISA data, on average, social background accounts for 20% of the variation in pupil's performance

in reading literacy; but this figure varies markedly from one country to the next (about 5% in Iceland, over 20% in central Europe);

- 2) some characteristics of the educational system prove important; the major ones are differentiation between tracks or schools (and the resulting segregation); that's because when the context pupils attended daily is segregated (and that's the case, more or less, within each country, it has some impact on the opportunity to learn : differentiated climate and instruction are offered, and that is socially selective (with the most advantaged pupils attending the contexts most favourable to learning). It is not only a matter of educational provision but also the result of the impact of the school mix itself (Opdenaker and van Damme, Duru-Bellat and al.), with better progress and self confidence in school attended by advantaged pupils, the reverse being true for popular schools.

Some national studies within this stream clearly remind us that school is, like Durkheim said, a “micro society”, shaped by social forces, that impinge not only upon what pupils learn (and are evaluated) but also and as important upon the socialisation taking place through contacts with a particular range of other people².

And an important result, from a theoretical point of view, is that the ability to choose the best context for your children proves as important a mechanism to explain social inequalities of schooling careers as the inequalities springing from “cultural inheritance” (Grisay). And here, we encounter again the importance of strategies, but they are strategies to control the quality of the schooling environment the child attends, the quality being often defined as the student body's characteristics of the school your child will attend (which does not run counter to a quest of efficiency).

Let's note that research also uncovers some puzzling facts : for instance, the effects of education visible at the micro levels do not necessarily turn out at the macro levels (when one compares societies). Confronting comparative research and studies conducted within a more restricted context can help explore the relatively unexplored question of whether there is a

² This may lead to an interesting distinction between what would be absolute effects of education (the capital of information pupils get), and relative one (relative attitudes, notably self-esteem), pupils acquire through comparisons with their playmates (Emler and Frazer, 1999).

continuity between the relationships assessed at the micro level and the ones which appear at the macro level; for instance education is linked with integration and social capital at the individual level, while it's not so sure that the best educated societies are the best integrated ones (Green and others, 2003). In other terms, which relationships don't hold at the macro level, because some of them would be due to only positional effects of education ?

3. From a theoretical point of view, we should try to integrate all this research...

Showing that inequalities in self-selection are as important as inequalities in attainment, for instance, or that the context attended (school or class) does have an impact upon the extent of social inequalities is meaningful in theoretical terms. It leads to question the macro-theoretical frames prevalent in the 70's (notably to go beyond the opposition between Bourdieu and Boudon's theories). There has been, in the field of comparative sociology of education, a growing suspicion towards what appeared as the determinism of Bourdieu's theory, leading to stress the part played by choice; but it led to a neglect of all that is undergone by the pupils :

- parental practices fostering unequal development,
- climate of the class and unequal opportunities of learning linked to the context attended,
- and resulting from all that, unequal attainment, which can't be considered as a choice...

The choice is not between a wholly deterministic way of explaining versus a wholly intentional one... That's because even the most rationalistic decisions mix with some undergone inequalities (inequalities of achievement, inequalities of information), and attitudes which have developed within contexts which have not been chosen themselves. And it's important to stress that while some actors do make choices, that turns into constraints for others.

Focusing upon the strategy of a rational actor leads also to neglect the specific part played by the school, as a "micro society". Social inequalities spring also from the fact that contents, organization or daily interactions are not "socially neutral" : they express dominance relations... So we must not consider school only as a given resource that unequal pupils use to preserve unequal ranking and advantages; social inequalities of attainment are produced within a social context and research in education and also in social psychology show that

some arrangements may affect them thoroughly. That leads to a constructivist understanding of the social inequalities. So, if a functionalist or over-determinist conception must be dropped, we must not shift to an over-individualistic one where school is only a theatre and doesn't matter...

Apart from this aim to integrate more strongly empirical research and theory, the kind of general overview proposed here may also have some social or political interest, which is not to be despised if we want to produce a "sociology that matters" (Goldthorpe). Among the political consequences it may have, let's stress for instance, that if education has mainly positional effects, one can't hope to reduce social inequalities by opening the system, because by so doing (and as long as inequalities are maintained within the society, with unequal families striving for unequal positions), inequalities will only occur further on. Here, we encounter again a somewhat pessimistic or deterministic view, not less marked than Bourdieu's one.

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