

# School Inequalities and Educational Policies: An Introduction

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**T**he articles in this thematic section of *Economie et Statistique / Economics and Statistics* have in common to address educational policies at the beginning of the 21st century from the angle of social inequalities in education, by using large databases capable of providing an objective and precise view of the trends in the French education system over the last twenty years.

This questioning of inequalities is rooted in a long tradition of educational research, stemming in particular from sociology. Since the first works by Coleman (1966) in the United States, Bernstein (1975) in the United Kingdom and Bourdieu & Passeron (1964) in France, the issue of educational inequalities has been imposed on our democratic societies, where one of the major principles for the attribution of places is the educational qualification – the diploma –, thought of as a measurement of merit and acquired skills.

One of the questions that sociology has constantly raised through its work on educational inequalities is that of access to merit and diplomas, which ethnographic approaches and statistical observations (van Zanten, 2015; Bourdieu, 1989) show to be closely linked to the objective characteristics of individuals – i.e. their social origin, their gender, their membership of a minority, etc. – and to the nature of the education system as well as the functioning of the institutions themselves. This questioning is all the more relevant today as France appears in international surveys to be one of the most unequal countries in the northern hemisphere in terms of the extent of the link between pupils' social and cultural position and their achievements at age 15 (OECD, 2019). This magnitude of social inequality in attainment takes on particular significance given the reference to equality in the national discourse.

In analysing this phenomenon, we are far from starting from zero. The social sciences have been working for decades to dissect it in its descriptive and empirical dimension and to identify its sources, in relation to the nature of the school institution itself. It is therefore not enough to measure inequalities, however precise and reliable the measures may be. It is also necessary to question public action in education and the means of limiting the extent of educational inequalities, the consequences of which on the fate of individuals and access to employment are regularly recalled (Henrard & Ilardi, 2017).

To that end, it is to explain what is meant by “inequalities” in the field of education and what their different forms are, to look at their sources and conditions, and finally, to address the issue of policies. This is what this introduction proposes before presenting the articles in this thematic section.

## What Do “Inequalities” Mean?

To begin with, we can define the concept of inequality by two main dimensions. The first is the nature of the goods that are unequally distributed; the second is the concrete principles

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that govern the distribution of these goods. Inequality exists where the goods concerned are scarce, useful and valued.

These may be material goods (income, assets or a quality living environment, for example) but also goods that are more symbolic, such as those distributed by schools in the form of qualifications or acquired skills. In sociology and economics of education, differences in the distribution of these scarce goods between individuals are considered to be inequalities when they depend on membership of a social group. This is the reasoning behind the statistical analysis of large school databases. For example, effort is made to explain – in the statistical sense of the term – the variance in the scores of pupils on standardised tests, through either their characteristics or their standing: their social background, gender, migratory background, their school, class, etc., in order to isolate things that do not depend on the individual as such – e.g. their effort, merit or talents – but on their membership of a particular social group, whether they benefit or are penalised from it.

However, this dichotomy between what depends on “society” and what depends on “the individual” quickly reaches its limits when viewed from a sociological perspective. Since the work of Bourdieu & Passeron (1970), it is acknowledged that “merit”, understood as the set of skills relevant to success at school, is itself the result of the family socialisation work that takes place from a very early age. It is therefore not surprising that these skills – or, if one prefers, this “merit” – are strongly linked to the social background of pupils. The work by van Zanten (2009) on this daily parental work, involving the transmission of knowledge and school values, as well as strategies for placement in the right establishments, clearly shows this construction of merit in close connection with the social standing of families. From a similar perspective but in different fields, Lahire (2019) gives a very precise view of the construction of young children’s psyches and individualities in contrasting social contexts. In a stratified society that is highly structured by inequalities in living conditions, these individualities are bound to have differentiated relationships to school and to school expectations. Hence the limits of meritocracy (Duru-Bellat, 2009), which consists of giving more – the best learning conditions, the most ambitious programmes, etc. – to those who already have more – the best pupils, often from the most privileged backgrounds. The preparatory classes for the French *grandes écoles*, the social recruitment of which is not very diversified, represent for many authors a symbol of the perverse effects of this meritocracy. For Baudelot & Establet (2009), this process is part of a “republican elitism” that functions as a powerful factor of social reproduction.

### **Academic Merit as a Social Construct**

To further explore the concept of inequality in education, especially to identify its sources, it is possible to introduce a first analytical distinction. In the case of learning, as mentioned above, the social advantage of pupils from privileged backgrounds is a powerful factor of inequality. From the earliest age, even before schooling, the development of children’s oral language, for example, is highly dependent on the family context – linguistic and cultural in particular – in which they grow up. However, language development is a strong predictor of attainment in terms of reading (Zorman *et al.*, 2015) and overall schooling. Inequalities are therefore created very early on and can be described as “primary” (Boudon, 1973) in the sense that they are strongly rooted in the primary socialisation of individuals. The foundation on which school builds is therefore not a homogeneous population, far from it. However, a simple international comparison of education systems shows that inequalities are not only primary. They also depend on the education systems themselves, the content valued in teaching, the methods used for selecting and assessing pupils, the general organisation of curricula, etc. PISA surveys do nothing more than reveal, every three years, these “secondary” inequalities linked to the education systems themselves and the slow sedimentation of successive education policies. An example can be found in one of the latest PISA reports (OECD, 2020) about the links between the age of the first stage of streaming and the extent of social inequalities in skills at age 15 in each country participating in the survey. The earlier this first step occurs in pupils’ schooling, the greater the social inequalities in performance and therefore the less fair the education systems

(OECD, 2020, p. 82). These streaming policies, which most often take place at the beginning of compulsory secondary education, thus accentuate the extent of learning inequalities.

A second analytical distinction concerns the scarcity of the goods whose distribution is being studied. This scarcity always depends on the state of schooling at a given time in a given society. Hence the difficulty of measuring the evolution of educational inequalities over the long term through the distribution of qualifications whose meaning and rarity may change over time. The example of the French baccalaureate is emblematic of this difficulty. Its pass rate has risen so sharply since the mid-20th century under the effect of policies to democratise education that long-term comparisons become difficult. Moreover, with its gradual differentiation in streams and options, the question arises as to what this diploma really measures. Hence the debate in the sociology of education on the evolution of social inequalities in obtaining the baccalaureate. According to Th  lot & Vallet (2000), the differences according to social origin were much smaller at the end of the 1990s than in the 1960s, while leaving a large gap between the children of managers and workers for all baccalaureates combined, and more marked for the general stream alone. Merle (2000) introduced the notion of “segregative democratisation” to describe the twofold movement of widening access to the baccalaureate and differentiation of social origin according to streams and series. The same questions arise in higher education, whose opening up has been accompanied by a strong diversification of the courses offered.

### **Inequalities: What Role for Educational Policies?**

The sources of educational inequalities are multiple and it is not possible to give a complete overview of them in the necessarily limited framework of this introduction.<sup>1</sup> The way in which schools consider and deal with inequalities between pupils from the outset is of course decisive. All dimensions of schooling are concerned, from the concrete space of the classroom and the course of teaching (Rochex & Crinon, 2011) to the structure and organisation of education systems (Mons, 2007). How do education policies produce more or less equality?

To echo the articles in this issue, we will attempt a brief response to these questions by taking the example of segregation. Research work, from the seminal research by Jencks (1979) to secondary analyses of the PISA data (Pomianowicz, 2021), has shown that school segregation is a powerful factor in inequality. School segregation can result from multiple factors: the consequence of a policy of early streaming starting at the end of primary education (Woessmann, 2009), school markets or quasi-markets (Felouzis *et al.*, 2013), differentiation of urban areas coupled with a school mapping system (van Zanten, 2012), or their combination. In any case, the degree of segregation of pupils based on their social or cultural characteristics, their migratory origin or their performance at school is strongly linked to the extent of inequalities in learning, orientation or obtaining qualifications.

Several mechanisms contribute to this phenomenon. This may be an effect of the differentiation of educational provision (i.e. curricula), in terms of both quality and quantity. This is the case, in particular, in education systems where streams prevail from the end of primary education, such as in Germany or in many cantons in Switzerland. However, differentiation can also result from the establishment, and then mainly as a function of place of residence, as in French secondary schools (Merle, 2012), with qualitatively contrasting schooling conditions, particularly in relation to peer effects. The meta-analysis by van Ewijk & Slegers (2010) on the effects of the socio-economic status of peers on the level of learning of pupils shows that such peer effects are substantial, accumulate over the years and that they explain a large part of the deleterious effects of school segregation on the learning of the most disadvantaged pupils.

1. See Felouzis (2020) for an in-depth review.

The few results mentioned above suggest that increasing social diversity in schools is one way to make the education system more equitable. In 2016, the report of the *Conseil national d'évaluation du système scolaire* (Cnesco, 2016) offered an unprecedented review of the reasons why schools in France produce injustice, amongst which segregation by social or migratory origin. In a contribution to this report (Felouzis *et al.*, 2016), we wondered whether the perverse effects of certain policies (e.g. priority education) had not in fact contributed to school segregation.

The example of the effects of segregation and the attempts to regulate them through the priority education policy show the extent of the questions that remain open. However, our analyses show that the fight against segregation itself, and the rebalancing of the social composition of junior high schools (*collèges*) in particular, is a significant way of improving the equity of education systems. An experiment with “multi-college sectors”, which has been underway since 2017 in two Parisian *arrondissements*, is a step in this direction. With the explicit objective of increasing social diversity in junior high schools, it aims to mix pupils at the start of junior high school (equiv. 6<sup>th</sup> grade in the US, year 7 in UK), thus tackling one of the aspects of segregation in large conurbations, where the assignment of pupils according to school sectorisation can result in large differences in social composition between geographically very close *collèges*. Limited to three school sectors, each involving two *collèges* that were initially very different in terms of the social origin of the pupils, its evaluation after three years (Grenet & Souidi, 2021) shows that voluntary actions can improve social diversity.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, this is only a local experiment, the results of which have not yet been evaluated, particularly in terms of its effects on the results of pupils in junior high school and the continuation of their schooling in high school. Moreover, from a pragmatic point of view, it can only be implemented in large conurbations where social diversity and a very fine school network are combined. But we choose to retain that a real political will can increase the social mix in schools and thus potentially give the best chances to a greater number of people to benefit from equitable conditions of learning and success.

#### **Four Contributions on Inequalities and Educational Policies**

These questions regarding the links between educational policies and inequalities are examined from different angles and for different levels of schooling and education in the four articles in this thematic section. Without revealing all the richness of the results presented, we now propose a short presentation.

The article by **Pierre Courtioux and Tristan-Pierre Maury** provides an analysis of the evolution of social diversity in secondary schools classified as priority education from 2004 to 2016 and the targeting of this policy: have its numerous reforms led to it being refocused on the most disadvantaged secondary schools, or not? Beyond this factual question, the authors examine whether priority education promotes the social integration of pupils, with a view to improving their learning conditions. Their analyses, carried out on exhaustive data from the French Ministry of education (*Base Centrale Scolarité – BCS*), show that a genuine refocusing of resources took place in 2015, with the implementation of priority education networks, relating to the secondary schools with the least wealthy social composition. Priority education, which aims to compensate for the effects of school segregation, thus appears to be better targeted at the end of the period studied, which is reflected in the lower social mix in the secondary schools concerned and the accentuation of the differences in mix between these schools and the others.

**Pauline Givord and Milena Suarez Castillo** look at the measurement of “school effects”, which aims to account for the contribution of the school – here, high schools – to the results of their students. In very brief terms, this effect is measured at individual school level as

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2. The experiment is continuing, but has not been extended to other *arrondissements*.

the difference between the results obtained by pupils in the French baccalaureate and the results predicted on the basis of their characteristics (social background in particular) and their initial schooling level (their grade in the *brevet* – GCSE equivalent). The authors point out all the difficulties in measuring this effect, but above all they question the relevance of measuring it at the average: does a positive effect reflect the action of a high school in which all students do better, or one in which only some students do very well and others do less well than expected in view of their characteristics? Using quantile regressions and for the results of the French baccalaureate in 2015, they show firstly that, in the vast majority of high schools, the differences between baccalaureate scores and those expected are not significant. However, they also note that, contrary to the idea that more equality means a levelling down, some high schools are succeeding in both reducing the gaps between students and improving the results of all their students.

The article by **Fabrice Murat** addresses the issue of educational inequalities from the perspective of school leavers' skills at the end of their studies. Based on an in-depth analysis of the 2004 and 2011 French *Information et Vie Quotidienne* (IVQ) surveys, the author shows firstly that there is a close link between skills and level of education, which is reassuring for the reader, but also that inequalities in skills can be observed at a given level of qualification. However, their extent remained stable between 2004 and 2011. Using data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the article also provides an international perspective, which shows that France is in the middle of the pack among European countries. This result, which contrasts with those of the PISA surveys from 2003 onwards, is explained by the fact that the young people who finished their studies in 2011 tend to correspond to those who took the PISA in the early 2000s, before the increase in social inequalities.

The thematic section of this issue ends with the article by **Romain Avouac and Hugo Harari-Kermadec**, who tackle an ambitious question: is university a “melting pot” or a place of social segregation? Using data from the *Système d'information sur le suivi de l'étudiant* (SISE, which monitors students university enrolment in France) to study the evolution of the social composition of universities over the 2007-2015 period, the authors show both the continuing trend towards opening up higher education, which began in the 1970s and 1980s, and a strong social polarisation of institutions. The social hierarchy of institutions is then linked to various mechanisms (in particular the *Initiatives d'excellence*, IDEX label, a major mechanism in terms of resources for the institutions) and international rankings (Shanghai Ranking). This relationship shows that the resources associated with the IDEX labels go to the establishments that concentrate the most advantaged student populations. In the end, this raises the question of the redistribution operated by higher education policies.

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