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Introduction

- 1 The empirical results on which this article is based are part of a wider research, conducted in the context of a PhD thesis on the comparison between the experiences and trajectories of working class young people in two urban contexts: Milan “Quarto Oggiaro” in Italy and the “Haut Montreuil” in France.
- 2 This article deals in particular with the relationship between education and inequalities at the local level. We will observe how education, next to its role in social mobility, can also be a decisive element of social reproduction in the French case.
- 3 Our starting point is that the modes of social reproduction have changed during the years and for this reason, compared to the past, some of the mechanisms involved are less clear and evident. In this perspective, the main objective and challenge of this article are to outline, through a qualitative approach, some of the mechanisms of social reproduction of inequalities, taking place through education in France at the local level¹.
- 4 In particular, as we will argue in the rest of the article, our hypothesis is that the family still has a great impact in determining the social reproduction of phenomena such as inequality and disadvantage. However, it is fundamental to consider the mediation, role and forms that it takes, inside and through education, in the distribution of students in the different schools (Felouzis and Perroton 2009 p.95).
- 5 With the “new” democratization process started during the sixties, through the reforms opening and unifying the low secondary school system, educational careers and experiences have become more and more differentiated on the basis of the school attended, from an ethnic, social and educational point of view.

- 6 In fact, during the past, the differentiation of students on the basis of their social and ethnic origins went through the different school typologies. Today, this role of social reproduction is mainly played by the school attended, considered also as a physical place, which becomes a decisive tool of social reproduction.
- 7 Of course, the family preserves a strong role in cultural transmission, but at the same time we cannot underestimate the influence of the peer group on the average performance of classes and schools, and more generally, on the educational and personal development of students.
- 8 These are all elements that we estimate to be decisive in the processes of social reproduction and which give a “new” role and importance to education at the local urban level. Not simply as context of action but also as a real configuration of the phenomena involved.
- “Place as social space crystallizes the particularity of exclusion processes, social welfare regimes, local policy, and so on, but also of local demography, network dynamics, labour market dynamics and school. Place becomes a multidimensional exclusion and integration process by itself: as a vortex of social forces, it rejects or accepts, integrates or repulses, deteriorates or upgrades its inhabitants, and so on” (Moulaert, Morlicchio and Cavola, 2008 p.150).
- 9 Therefore, the level of analysis of this article is twofold: the national and the urban, neighbourhood level (Moulaert 1995; Madanipour, Cars and Allen 1998).
- 10 The neighbourhood represents the scale on which the institutional mechanisms concretely perform. It is indeed at this micro perspective that we can better observe how phenomena are shaped and crystallized with specific configurations due to the local characteristics and peculiarities (strength of familiar kinships, neighbourhood’s solidarity, deprivation or presence of services, working opportunities, local social policies, presence of associations, etc.).
- 11 In the specific case of schools, for example, at the neighbourhood level we can observe an interconnection between local elements, such as the characteristics of the population and some other more institutional aspects, such as reforms (“*Carte Scolaire*”) and internal regulations (decisions of teachers concerning the school program and educational contents, disciplinary measures etc.).
- 12 In brief, we will investigate the mechanisms by which social inequalities are produced and reproduced at schools at the local level. From both a macro and micro perspective, we intend to analyse: access of students to specific schools; their population and the interactions inside the peer group: an element having a strong influence on educational attainment; the role of the teachers implemented through evaluation and marks; family strategies concerning school choice and the practical results these choices may have on class composition and interaction.
- 13 At the same time, some fundamental issues to be analysed are the interconnections between the multiple rationales of the system and the specific practices and behaviours of the actors involved.
- « Le défi, pour la sociologie de l’éducation (défi classique pour la sociologie, cf Collins, 1981) est de cumuler les apports respectifs des approches, des plus ‘macro’ aux plus ‘micro’, de faire le lien entre les interactions individuelles et les régularités statistiques qui constituent les divers niveaux de la réalité scolaire (et sociale), ce qui exige d’explorer les processus intermédiaires² » (Duru-Bellat and VanZanten 2006 p. 215).

- 14 As Dubet and Martucelli (1996) pointed out, the concept of “school experience” - *expérience scolaire* - is very much related to the social situation of young people and the pressures to which they are subject, forcing them to face realities that might have been unknown to them before. This is especially true for young people from low social class backgrounds, having to cope with the rules and values of school, very often in contrast, or at least not always aligned, with the predominant values of their families.

Methodology

- 15 We adopted an ethnographic approach, referring to both participant observation³ and open-ended, in-depth interviews, conducted through face-to-face interactions with young people, their families, and the organizations and institutions of the neighbourhood (mainly school teachers, social workers and associations helping students with after school homework).
- 16 As far as the main target of our study is concerned, young people between 15 and 30 years old, they are – or have been - fundamental actors in the process of education. In fact, they are at the centre of important phenomena and mechanisms obtaining at school. Their role, perceptions, (past and present) experiences are what we concretely analyse to understand how education at a local level can have a particular influence on their personal, education and future professional development. At the same time, as we will extensively observe in this article, next to all institutional actors – such as teachers - contributing to determine the educational experience of students, a fundamental element is the family.
- 17 The family and social background have indeed a considerable weight in the relationship between individuals and education. In our analysis, we contextualised family trajectories in the entire process of reproduction of inequalities and social disadvantage, in order to estimate their significance and role and in particular as concerns schools. We looked at the family as the place where ambitions, expectations and educational plans are built. At the same time, we tried to adopt a generational perspective, analysing together with the individual trajectories and experiences of our young target, those of their parents. As some scholars have argued (Segalen 2010), the observation of two or three generations enables us to provide a more complete framework of the situation and trajectories, which to a certain extent can also be reproduced from generation to generation.
- 18 Going back to the research and investigation approach we chose, this decision has been made mainly for two important reasons. First of all, because an ethnographic approach to the study of the neighbourhood and its correlated phenomena and effects - such as those of the local educational offer - entails direct access to the condition of poor neighbourhoods and residents (Small 2010). By doing so, we were able to track down and identify some of the micro and macro mechanisms producing an observed effect, or accounting for the absence of an expected relationship. Moreover, this methodology of investigating neighbourhood casts light on how residents of poor neighbourhoods take important decisions about their situation (inside and outside their household): all elements which are very difficult to be captured through quantitative methods. In-depth interviews, proved very useful to investigate the intimate perception young people have both of their school experience and neighbourhood. Including the social

relations taking place there and of all the strategies young people and in particular their families may use to create an attachment or distance from the neighbourhood.

- 19 This qualitative approach has been important for analysing the social dynamics and relations occurring both in the family, at schools and in the neighbourhood. For all these reasons, we have decided to give particular prominence to life stories and narrations of young people and their parents, in order to better explain and outline the main mechanisms through which, with the mediation of a strong family effect, school experiences in specific contexts can contribute to the social reproduction of inequalities.
- 20 Because of this methodological choice, transcripts of interviews will at times be somewhat long. In our opinion, this helps to understand the real living experience of our target group. In fact, as we will observe, next to positive outcomes, the educational experience and some direct or indirect discriminations taking place at school could also create frustration and sufferance. In this respect, ethnography, working on the basis of experience, is able to capture the real essence and live experience of social reality⁴.
- 21 To conclude, the use of these qualitative tools might create a sort of empathy between the researcher and the population studied; something that probably happened also in our case. However, in order to avoid any misunderstanding of the significance and content of these experiences, we must point out that our aim as social scientists is not to provide justifications, excuses or on the contrary negative judgements for individual's actions, but to frame these actions in the wider social context, trying to explain them.
- 22 Therefore, if we should not victimize, we should also not "blaming the victim", a quite constant fear for most social scientists and especially for those doing field research. The attitude of the foreigner (Schutz 1979) is at times difficult but a somehow necessary experience. For this reason, one of the objectives of the social scientist should be to double and detach himself from his daily life, believes, what he is and what he is studying: a detachment which of course is not always possible⁵.

Segregation and Education

- 23 An important aspect generally associated with segregation is the problem of the services and resources available at the local level. The structural characteristics of a neighbourhood in terms of the presence or absence of specific services and infrastructures are elements contributing to the quality and reputation of an area. As some scholars have shown, opportunities of access to material and symbolic goods offered by the city are unequal (Pinçon-Charlot, Préteceille - 1986). However, in the case of school and education, a simple consideration of the number of resources, status and quality of the premises is not enough. It is always important to consider the quality of social relations and practices. School is an important element in the relationship between segregation and social inequalities. This is particularly true in the case of France, where school is at the centre of social inequalities and more in general of social relations (Oberti, 2007). Around school and education, there are many strategies and much interplay deliberately implemented by middle class families in order to obtain the most prestigious educational credentials.

« Les classements et les verdicts scolaires y trouvent une traduction sociale particulièrement forte qui rejaillit sur le prestige social des individus et leur

possibilité d'accès aux meilleurs positions. Objet de toutes les critiques, elle continu d'être l'institution par excellence à travers laquelle le devenir social des individus est pensé, voir fantasmé⁶» (Oberti 2007, p. 36).

- 24 As pointed out, very often the real weight and influence of education on individuals' chances and opportunities seem to be overestimated, leading to a sort of obsession which however contributes to increase social inequalities.
- 25 In this specific context, the attempts of (middle class) households to access those schools having the best reputation, avoiding all others considered as less prestigious, increases educational segregation.
«Il y a des pratiques diverses et souvent subtiles des classes supérieures ou moyennes pour éviter les établissements à trop forte concentration d'enfants des catégories populaire ou immigrées, dans lesquels les filières et les options sont souvent peu attractives et les conditions d'apprentissage parfois médiocres⁷» (Paugam 1995, p. 568).
- 26 As observed by Serge Paugam, a decisive element to be outlined concerns the relationship between ethnic origins and segregation, which is extremely important, since the phenomenon of over-representation of one or more ethnic groups, may turn into real segregation processes.
- 27 In France, ethnic segregation seems to be from a quantitative perspective, a decisive and stronger phenomenon compared to other potential elements of segregation: such as social origins and educational attainments, for example. At the same time, it is difficult to argue this in ontological terms, going beyond a "simple" quantitative perspective (Felouzis and Perroton 2009).
- 28 However, as some important qualitative studies in the US have shown (Sikkink and Emerson, 2008) the racial and ethnic composition seems to be one of the major criterion on which parents choose their children's school. The quality of schools seems to be therefore perceived on the basis of mostly external and immediate criteria, which very often dominate on other more objective criteria such as the teachers' quality.
- 29 In this perspective, as we will observe, the French experience provides a significant and not necessarily positive example, as far as the integration of second - and third - generation immigrants, taking place at school is concerned. However, it is important not to limit our considerations to immigration.

Educational segregation and policies in France

- 30 In this section we will see how the interaction between actors, policies, institutions and structural constraints occurs at the local level and which specific mechanisms are implemented in the reproduction of social inequalities affecting school and education.
- 31 Each individual develops his/her subjectivity on the basis of perceptions and social interactions (between peers, teachers and students, etc.) taking form in a specific context and place, which offers different opportunities of access to educational, cultural and social resources. Thus, it emerges quite clearly how the educational experience, like others in work, family and relations, can prove more difficult or easier depending on the family background, residence and school attended.
- 32 When tackling the relationship between segregation and education in France, one of the first and most important concepts to deal with is the "Carte Scolaire", an

institutional tool established in 1963 with the aim of providing all children with equal access to school according to their abilities. Originally, the «Carte Scolaire» was a national policy aiming at rationalizing the different institutes at the local level. At the same time, an effect has also been the regulation of school flows and their classification in different sectors (Charlot, 1994). In order to avoid disparities between different schools, this policy created a rule associating students to their place of residence through “Sectorisation”.

- 33 In specific contexts, this tool is able to determine the structure of attendance of each school, from the social point of view, on the basis of the resident population. The element of the “Sectorisation” which was originally just one of the aspects of the “Carte Scolaire” assumed great relevance, becoming, to a certain extent, the main focus of this policy.
- 34 In the nineties, the Ministry of Education tried to re-focus the “Carte Scolaire” on the paradigm of “Mixité Sociale”. Recent studies recognized how its administration has proved debatable, sometimes producing opposite results to those intended (Laforgue, 2005). In general, we may register two main positions: one pushing for abolishment of “Carte Scolaire”, proposing free choice for families and a stronger competitiveness among schools to attract students; and another arguing that abolition would increase territorial inequalities at the urban level.
- 35 A relatively recent study conducted by the *Rectorat de Paris* (2005) has helped to identify some typical mechanisms of the “Sectorisation”, as well as the choices and strategies implemented by families. 8 % of households living in a neighbourhood classified as “urbain défavorisé” are able to bypass the “Carte Scolaire” through a derogation allowing them to send their children to a lower secondary school of a better neighbourhood, classified as “urbain favorisé”. Several criteria and mechanisms through which schooling strategies take place have been outlined. The first concerns the image of the school, seeking to extend the educational supply by diversifying classes and proposing different curricula (section *Latiniste, Cham⁸, Européenne*). However, educational segregation does not simply concern the relationship between schools but also different classes in the same institute, due to the existence of specialized classes, creating a social stratification on the basis of social capital and background. Other elements are the safety and security of students (Baconnier, Marguerite, Geoffroy 2008), and the teachers’ stability and turnover. In short, according to this research, these all are criteria that families look to, when choosing a school. Should these requirements not be completely satisfied, they could implement “avoiding practices”⁹. This phenomenon seems to be very widespread, particularly in Paris and its surroundings. To correct the situation, the national government has tried to redefine the “Carte Scolaire”, promoting the above-mentioned objective of social mix.
- 36 As from 2007, parents can send their children to schools out of their own sector, if the chosen institute is able to accept students other than those assigned on the basis of the residence. However, some priority criteria are set and concern: students with disabilities; students with scholarships based on merit; students responding to certain social criteria; children who need serious medical care delivered close to the school requested; students requiring a particular educational programme; students whose siblings attend the same school; and students living close to the sector border.
- 37 The government seems to put an emphasis on the increased educational options and freedom for families, rather than deeply considering the real problem of educational

segregation. This attitude can be in part explained from a political and electoral point of view, since the government would gain credit among middle class households, a strategic political target for the right-wing. (Bottani 2007).

- 38 Most scholars agree that not all students will be able to benefit from this deregulation (Duru-Bellat and Van Zanten 2006). In fact, the gap between lower and upper social class students could remain the same, if not even greater. For instance, a previous study conducted in Lille by Barthon and Monfroy (2004) registered a fairly marked social division and polarization among different lower secondary schools in the city, following a sort of social hierarchy, associated with educational choices and perceptions of households. The authors note the importance of urban dynamics, which are interconnected with educational policies and administration of schools. Similarly, through a research conducted in the Haut-de-Seine, Oberti (2007) shows how in a same urban context there may be a co-existence of excellent schools with others, more typical of a “*Banlieue Populaire*”.
- 39 It is worth noting that schooling and family strategies towards education are not the same in every context. In fact, as shown by this scholar, they can vary from one context to another, reminding us once again of the existence of different urban dynamics. In particular, he notices how some schools in working class neighbourhoods may concentrate a number of students with a similar disadvantaged profile and also shows how the educational supply can bring about a hierarchy among schools, affirming:
- « Ces données questionnent aussi directement la capacité de la carte scolaire à agir sur la mixité sociale dans les collèges. Présentés comme un dispositif de lutte contre la ségrégation scolaire, ces résultats mettent en évidence son faible impact sur les pratiques des classes moyennes et surtout supérieures, qui subissent le moins les contraintes spatiales. Les classes populaires voient au contraire leur assignation spatiale (liée, dans les quartiers les plus dégradés, à une forte stigmatisation) renforcée par une assignation scolaire qui fonctionne de façon beaucoup plus efficace à leur égard. Effet paradoxal d’une mesure visant à lutter contre les inégalités sociales à l’école (la mixité étant censée atténuer les différences sociales et scolaires entre établissements), et qui s’applique précisément de façon profondément inégalitaire en faveur des classes les plus favorisées¹⁰ » (Oberti 2007 p.21).
- 40 In the same direction, Korsu (2004) analyses mechanisms of competitiveness among schools, such as policies and programs to attract students showing good educational results and from “good” social backgrounds. The function of schools then becomes something more than the simple transmission of skills and knowledge, being more a complex and stratified system.
- 41 In conclusion, most scholars agree on judging the “*Carte Scolaire*” as an inadequate tool to fight educational segregation. At the same time, simple changes such as those proposed by the government cannot serve as a solution for educational inequalities (Baconnier, Marguerite, Geoffroy 2008). In a similar direction, other scholars (Lagrange and Oberti 2006; Donzelot 2004) argued that its redefinition should be more connected with urban policies, such as housing, to perform direct actions on the resident population.
- 42 In this perspective, the challenges of segregation in general, and in particular in education, consist in a direct involvement and constant update of all actors: households, students and more institutional actors, such as schools (teachers and management) and politicians.

School, between aspirations and constraints

- 43 As we extensively noticed, school acts on a double level: the institutional dimension and a more communitarian one, involving the family and other actors at the local level (Henriot and Van Zanten 1991). In our perspective, what matters is the interaction between school and families, in particular those with low economic and social capital. We already discussed some important measures implemented by middle class households, such as “*schooling phenomena*” and “*avoiding strategies*”. At this point, we should focus on poor and low social class families. In fact, despite the fact that they have fewer resources to invest (both from an economic and social capital perspective) we should not completely neglect their actions and choices.
- 44 However, some significant differences from the sixties and seventies have now emerged in France concerning the degree of complexity and conflict observed at school as an institution and physical place. Before the extension of the “*democratization process*”, higher education involved only a minority of the working class. These students represented the elite and were, in a way chosen by the educational system through a kind of selection, partially based on educational results but also on their adaptation to the social values promoted by schools and teachers. Next to French working class students, there were also second generations of Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and in some cases Maghreb young people. They seemed to be more easily integrated and apparently they better absorbed values, rules, behaviours, language, ways of speaking and dress codes in use at school. They were better aligned with the values promoted by school.
- 45 As shown by Jackson and Marsden (1962) in the British context, an important role was also played by these lower social class households, implementing specific strategies such as the exemption from housework (especially for girls), purchase of books and encyclopaedias, use of local relations, social capital and professional, personal and associative networks.
- 46 Nowadays, despite the “*democratization processes*” and a generalized increase of participation, a social integration through school seems to be more complicated. Of course, this does necessary imply a complete lack of strategies by low social class households. The lack of integration and the educational failures are not entirely a problem concerning households’ responsibility.
- 47 There is a combination of institutional, local mechanisms and of course personal characteristics of students, their interest and motivation. However, this last element is very often neglected, because difficult to be estimated.
- 48 Families may continue making efforts to be present and determine some educational results of their children. Nevertheless, in this new and more complex frame, all these actions seem to be less efficient than in the past. We also noticed how poor families may implement schooling strategies. Nevertheless, they appear to be more limited and restricted in geographic terms, compared to those of the middle class. In fact, as Halima underlined, the school she chose for her children was considered to be the best in Montreuil and not on the whole territory, including Paris, where the best schools are located.

“Although I don’t have a good education and I don’t speak very well French, I try to take care of my children’s education. When they were young, I used to send them at

the school support, organized by an association of the neighbourhood. As far as the choice of the school is concerned, the high school we chose had the highest score for academic results in Montreuil” (Halima 52 years old).

49 And again...

“I have attended Colonel Fabien. Half of the neighbourhood goes there. Either they send us there or to Lenan de Tillemont. However at my school there was much more social and ethnic mix. There were also many bobos¹¹. On the contrary, at Lenan de Tillemont there is more concentration of poor households. Thank god, all people living in my area are sent to Colonel Fabien. Otherwise my mother would have tried anything to change my school. She has always paid a lot of attention to our education” (Julien, 23 years old, Haitian origin. Brevet d'Etude Professionnelle).

50 An important element for poor households is the existence of effects connected to the neighbourhood of residence and the social relations based on parental and family mobilization.

51 A somewhat old but interesting study conducted in France on a national sample of about one hundred students of Algerian origin who had gone through a successful educational career, shows how the residential mobility of parents matters, together with the characteristics of the place of residence (Santelli, 2001). Many of them managed to avoid the neighbourhood through some strategies implemented by their families, such as the choice of alternative schools outside very segregated neighbourhoods and residential mobility. The study also pointed out how the fact of moving to a less homogeneous and more differentiated area brought them into contact, for example, with French origin people: something facilitating the use of French and spreading among immigrant families some of the values predominating at school.

“With my parents we didn't know exactly what school to choose. I decided to attend the 'Lycée Général'¹² because a neighbor of us, living in this same building had attended that school. After me, for my sisters and brothers it has been much easier since I was there to help them. My little sister will start next year the faculty of medicine” (Mohammed 29 years old).

52 The neighbourhood may sometimes also work through a positive *peer* and *model effect*, influencing school choices, ambitions and spreading among families certain socio-educational practices driving in the direction of educational success. However, a problem lies in the number of these positive models.

53 Despite the important role of *peer effects* and *role models* in the neighbourhood, with regard to the significant relationship between poverty, aspirations and educational attainment, an interesting approach is offered by those authors reconsidering the concept of culture in the approach to poverty. These “new” approaches consider culture as an element providing the means for action. Unlike the “old” perspective (Lewis, 1959) the connotation of the term culture has changed significantly. The idea of culture as simple values or ideals is rejected to give way to other conceptions of culture such as a “*toolkit*” or “*repertoire*” (Swidler 1986, 2001; Lamont and Small 2008). More generally, culture is defined as « complex rule-like structures that constitute resources that can be put to strategic use » (DiMaggio 1997, p. 265). It is described as a vocabulary that people can mobilize to make sense of their practices and conducts (Lamont 1992; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) or skills allowing the subject to do something (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 1990; Swidler 2008). Also Bourdieu has analysed the links between education and culture. His work (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977/1990) offers extremely important references in this field. However, the well-known notion of “*cultural capital*”

is considered more as a resource than a motivation, while it is the concept of “*habitus*” that is more closely related to the model of cultural internalization and may therefore be more relevant for focusing on motives (Dumais 2002; Vaisey 2010). In this direction Lizardo (2004, p. 394) defines the “*habitus*” as a “cognitive-motivational system shaping perception and choice”.

- 54 Bourdieu’s use of the term is not always consistent, since he does not define it solely in terms of conceptions of “*what is possible*” (Dumais 2002, p. 47) but sees it as something involving at the same time “*motivations*” and “*subjective aspirations*” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 54). However, since he affirms that the “*habitus*” is shaped by “*experiences statistically common to members of the same class*” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 60), we can assume that the socioeconomic status shapes also people’s desires and expectations.
- 55 This model seems therefore to suggest that the poor will have lower socioeconomic aspirations than their richer peers and that these aspirations will have implications for evaluation and action, serving to reproduce their social position (Bourdieu 1984). Similarly, Sanchez-Jankowski (2008) largely supports this idea in an ethnographic work on poor neighbourhoods in New York and Los Angeles, although he rejects the hypothesis that the “subculture of scarcity” in poor neighbourhoods is fixed and inevitably leads to social disorganization and misery. He states that living in such neighbourhoods “powerfully reinforces values that make life meaningful within the particular structural conditions of poverty, though at the expense of values found in the larger society that would improve a person’s chances for obtaining and maintaining socioeconomic mobility” (Sanchez-Jankowski p. 348). Arguing all this and avoiding any interpretation of the traditional “*culture of poverty*” approach, which to some extent blamed the victims, he recognizes how aspirations of the poor and socially disadvantaged populations may differ from those of the middle classes (Vaisey 2010).
- 56 Young people coming from the middle-class usually live in a social context driving them to continue education, while most of the poor young people do not, or at least live and grow up in a situation where such transmission occurs less often or with greater costs for them and their families.

“If poor youth - unlike their more advantaged peers - cannot simply ‘go with the flow’ and end up in college, their educational ideals might matter more for predicting their choices because they need to be motivated enough to overcome the surrounding social inertia. Perhaps more of their own efforts are necessary to get them into a position where going to college becomes a viable option.” (Vaisey 2010 p. 94).
- 57 Moreover, the biggest gap among students from different social backgrounds may exist, not among the best performing students, but on the contrary among those with low or average results. For these students, social background and parental strategies may indeed count more.
- 58 In this perspective, we also recognize a sort of combination between educational ideals, cultural motives and, of course, structural elements such as economic and social capital deprivation, without at the same time pushing for an over responsibility and “*blaming the victims*” for their educational ideals.

Orientation and school choice between institutional and local models

- 59 Taking into consideration the institutional characteristics of the educational system, France has a medium level of stratification. A first differentiation occurs at low secondary school (*collège*) through some classes of specialization and curricula¹³, although they are just partially institutionalized. In many cases this is a strategy to attract “good students”, with the official and institutional aim of promoting social mix. On the contrary, these classes are homogeneous as far as the students’ performance and social background are concerned.
- 60 More generally, as far as school dynamics are concerned, it is important to consider the orientation and school choice as a decisive moment for students and carriers. In general, educational attainment seems to respond to a rationale, which is at the same time academic (progress follows good results) and social. The international literature and empirical evidence have shown that orientation choices differ appreciably based on the social background.
- 61 Concerning the French orientation process, a general rule is that the final decision emerges from an exchange between teachers and the family, being a sort of compromise between aspirations, wishes and the objective academic results. Families know quite well that choices depend on educational results and they normally adapt their options to the concrete skills of the child. However, particularly in the case of average level students, social background becomes a quite significant variable:
- « Quand la situation est incertaine, les familles de milieu populaire, plus sensibles au risques d’échec dans les études à venir, se montrent plus prudentes que les familles de milieu aisé, et renoncent à demander les filières générales, plus valorisées, pour se ‘rebattre’ sur une formation professionnelle (sachant que ceci est moins vrai pour les familles étrangères¹⁴) ; à l’inverse, toujours pour les élèves un peu ‘justes’, seules les familles de milieu aisé ‘osent’ demander les orientations les plus valorisées. Or, ces demandes familiales sont fortement prises en compte par les conseils de classes qui, comme les textes les y invitent, ont tendance à les ‘suivre’ ; de fait, en suivant ainsi les demandes exprimées, mais aussi en ne ‘corrigeant’ pas à la hausse les demandes de ceux qui sont fortement auto-sélectionnés, les conseils entérinent les biais sociaux incorporés dans ces demandes¹⁵ » (Duru-bellat, Van Zanten 2006 p. 45).
- 62 It is also recognized that, in general, teachers and orientation counsellors take into account social background as a main variable when “proposing” an orientation.
- 63 Therefore, in the case of France, social inequalities appear to exist in primary school, and increase at the higher levels of education, following specific mechanisms: educational success seems to vary depending on the social origin; and the increase of inequality is due to the choice of classes and the orientation process.
- 64 As far as high school is concerned, the French system is particularly stratified and differentiated in the levels of competence provided to students, and social background still retains a decisive role. For example, at a national level the presence of children of executives (*cadres*) is 33% in *Bacs généraux*, 14% in *Bacs technologiques* and 11% in *Bacs professionnels*. Social differences are also recorded in the different specializations (*séries*) of *Bacs généraux*: executives’ children represent a 54% in the *sériescientifique*, a 43% in the *série économique* and *littéraire* and between 27% and 31% in the technological one (Insee, 2006: Duru-Bellat and Van Zanten 2006).

65 Most scholars have recently observed an increasing hierarchy in the different specializations. Thus, if lower social class students choose a technological field, white collar workers' children will be much more concentrated in *série scientifique*: a mechanism, which has been defined as "*démocratisation ségrégative*" (Merle, 2000).

66 Therefore, although the limit of the *Lycée* has been overcome by working class children, an internal differentiation remains. And furthermore, their full participation in the educational system questions the quality of their participation and also the value of their educational credentials.

«Beaucoup d'entre eux [...jeunes lycéens de milieux populaires], sans héritage culturel ou économique, se sont lancés, parfois "malgré eux", dans cette voie des études longues, portés dans les années 1985-1995 par la vague grossissante de la démocratisation des lycées¹⁶» (Beaud, 2003).

67 As Mathieu mentions:

"At the moment I am searching for a job. I don't go to school and I stopped my Bac Pro when I was eighteen. At the very beginning I started the Bac Général. They fooled me. I listened to what my professors told me. They said I could have done it: that I was capable and had good marks to go to the Bac Général. I was a good student but I never did my homework and studied at home. I was always out downstairs with my friends. After that I tried a BEP – Brevet Etude Professionnelle, in secretariat but once again as I had good marks, they sent me back to the Bac. This time was the professional one. However, after two months I left school again. I have never gone until the end. This is my problem" (Mathieu, 19 years old. French origin).

68 Another important aspect concerns gender differences. Girls have generally better results than boys at high school, with an average score of diploma obtainment equal to 75.4% against the 62.9% of boys. This is also confirmed by our analysis, since we generally observed more difficult educational trajectories and experiences among boys. The causes are the local dimension, and the fact that lower social class male students are less easily controlled by their families and seem to be more invested in public spaces than their female counterparts.

69 However, it is important to say that although girls usually follow more regular educational paths, they are not exempted from the same mechanisms of selection, based on local and social rationales, especially in the future steps of their academic careers: at high school, but in particular during the access to the *Grands Ecoles*¹⁷ and most prestigious universities.

"Before high school, I attended Le Nan de Tillemon, which is considered as one of the worst low secondary schools in Montreuil. However, everything was fine with me there. I was one of the best students. My problems started at high school, when I attended the Bac Littéraire. Especially at the beginning it has been quite difficult and the first two years I made a lot of efforts. My family helped me with after school support and I managed. Unfortunately problems came back for access to university. I wanted to attend the Sorbonne University but they did not accept me and oriented me toward a minor university at the outskirts of Paris." (Jasmine 20 years old. Algerian origin).

70 As we noticed, the characteristics of the family and social background can significantly influence the orientation processes at different educational levels: low secondary school (college) high school and university. However, an important element connected to the social background, concerns the lower secondary school attended. The previous

educational experience influences not only the present and future educational performance, but also the orientation process itself.

- 71 In Montreuil the most segregated low secondary school, having a very negative reputation is *Lenan de Tillemont*: also classified as a ZEP¹⁸. On the other hand, two other schools (*Jean Jaures* and *Colonel Fabien*) are generally less homogeneous, showing a greater social and ethnic mix, despite a marked internal differentiation among classes.

“I attended Lenan de Tillemont... There are much better schools in the neighbourhood and everybody knows it. In general I have good memories about the time I spent there, but for sure it has not been helpful for my educational carrier... quite the opposite I could say.” (Mathieu, 19 years old).

- 72 Going deeper into the processes of orientation towards high school, we will see how these selections are made and by which micro mechanisms and dynamics they are determined. At the same time, we see how in such ‘difficult’ educational and social contexts, these choices are perceived as a decisive moment, having a strong impact on students’ self-perception.

- 73 In general, young people do not live this experience as a real choice, but more as something imposed upon them. They generally experience a feeling of disqualification, being classified as low quality students to be sent to low quality schools. All this determines a loss of self-esteem, which is very often the key to motivation and good results.

“I wanted to go in construction, but they sent me to the secretariat and administration school. It was not what I wanted to do. After that I tried with plumber but they refused me. I had to find a job in order to be accepted at school and I had no idea how to do that. I got quite depressed and felt pissed.” (Mathieu 19 years old).

- 74 As the case of Mathieu clearly shows, we generally register a major problem with students who have no clear idea about their future, skills and desires, which is often the case for those with a low social class background. In particular if their family cannot provide real support in terms of orientation and social capital. At the same time, schools and teachers might be partially responsible for these negative consequences of the orientation process. In these contexts, they have sometimes difficult relations with students, neglecting to motivate them and underestimating their skills.

- 75 However, the institutionalized procedure also matters in this context, as explained by this social worker:

“The orientation process in France works this way: they give you a brochure (ONISEP¹⁹) and you have to select your options. By the way this brochure is not that easy to read and understand. It is not very practical. In most cases, especially in difficult neighbourhood’s schools, there is no real interaction and exchange in the orientation process. If the first option is full, you go to the second and if the second is also full, you go to the third. Many students do not make a real choice, they just choose what is still available and very often they choose the Lycée, despite the fact they do not often have an adequate preparation. There is little time, everything is fast and automatic. For some professional schools, which are quite requested in these kinds of neighbourhoods, as plumber, considered especially in Paris as a well-paid job, what counts is not the educational level or marks. It is on a first come basis and very often the problem of these students is that they decide last minute and should take only what remains.” (Social worker of the association Rues et Cités).

- 76 It's not easy for students to escape these mechanisms, not even through the help and commitment of their families. Very often they attend affordable private schools, or they try to "escape" out to Paris, where the most prestigious schools are concentrated.

"After low secondary school, we tried to do that with my daughter, Marie. We wanted to send her to a very good and quite élite high school, in a good neighbourhood of Paris. There, I really experienced discrimination. I felt rejected. It had nothing to do with the skin color of my daughter, since her father is from Mali but it was mainly due to the fact that we came from Montreuil. That day I really felt depreciated. The school director looked at me from the top to the bottom and Marie was clearly far from being accepted. First of all my daughter did not have very good marks but I am sure that if I was a bourgeois I could have forced the door and sneak in. But I was shy and I felt like I was a concierge of an HLM (social housing project) in Montreuil. This episode had a huge impact on myself and also on my daughter, for sure." (Anne 55 years old)

- 77 In this perspective, we observe the existence of specific mechanisms of neighbourhood effects and spatial exclusion, in which the local dimension may have a determinant role influencing the individual educational trajectory. This is especially so in the case of the orientation process, next to the high importance of the family and social background. It is difficult to measure a pure effect of the neighbourhood, especially from a qualitative perspective. However, it's important to outline some processes and mechanisms which clearly take place in education at the local level and in particular in the decisive moment of school choice and orientation.

School class and educational results

- 78 Educational experiences can vary greatly. Depending on the school attended, students are likely to have different experiences and their educational attainment can vary significantly in quality and performance. Often these disparities are between schools but also between classes in the same school, changing from teacher to teacher, from context to context, etc.
- 79 Schools generally claim that the distribution of students is not organized, but random. However, there is evidence contradicting this statement. Recent studies have indeed shown that, in most schools, classes are differentiated on the basis of the students' level and performance; so there are "good" and "bad" classes (Giry-Coissart and Niel 1997; Duru-Bellat and Mingat 1997).
- 80 In this perspective we can better frame the schooling strategies of middle class parents. This situation creates a competition between schools in "bad neighbourhoods" and peripheral areas, trying to attract "good students", but even more, "students from a good family", in order to keep the class level up to a certain standard, both from an educational and social point of view.
- 81 In general, grouping students of the same level in homogeneous classes has no systematic effect on educational progress, although the ways groups are formed contribute to widening the gaps between the students (Duru-Bellat and Van Zanten 2006) and of course it has a great relevance from the point of view of socialisation
- 82 The educational differentiation may come about through different mechanisms (Pallas *et al.*, 1994). First of all, teachers control and decide the educational contents and how to use them. Proposing an "adequate" standard for the class, teachers conform to a

silent principle, dividing students by level. In this way, depending on the typology of students, they can also adapt their teaching methods. For example, in a class with a weak average level, teachers usually attribute more importance to oral exams and generally try to focus more on the commitment and motivation than on the concrete results. In this way, the attitudes and behaviours of students are heavily conditioned and the differences may increase. Concerning teachers' choices and their pedagogic strategies in difficult educational contexts, a lot of importance seems to be attributed to requirements and workload. In fact, if the class is classified as "difficult", this may significantly lower the syllabus level, as well as the average preparation and performance of students.

- 83 Two other important issues connected to the teachers' role in segregated educational contexts are the turnover and the perceived quality of teachers; despite the fact that this last variable could be more subjective, depending on individual experience.

"Teachers fear the violence. Many of them do not accept to teach in this or that school. That's why most of teachers here are very young and with little experience. In my son's school, there is always a new professor in the middle of the year, something which has huge consequences on school programs and on students' behavior." (Karima).

- 84 Perturbation and violence are problems arising in particular in lower level classes and are connected to the students' attention and concentration, which vary strongly during daytime and over the year (Eder and Felmlee, 1983).

- 85 Phenomena such as violence and bullying are particularly developed among male students and their cause can be found in both family and school socialization (Peignard *et al.* 1998). They seem to have a connection with a concentration of students with particularly disadvantaged profiles and experiencing educational failure. In our neighbourhood case, students of immigrant origins seem to be over-represented among those showing deviant behaviours, yet another element setting a difference between their socialization and that of their teachers, and underlining the ambivalence of their identity. Violence and perturbation are important dimensions when we analyse the atmosphere and educational environment. In fact, gathering students whose *frame of reference* (Thrupp 2005) is distant from school values produces a real segregation effect. It strongly affects class relations, creating an atmosphere which is incompatible with the learning process. More than that, the attitude towards students' education in these schools is modelled by the relegation they perceive about their school and the consequent stigmatization. Therefore, these processes of segregation do not remain unperceived by students, who on the contrary interiorise the stigma, making it part of their identity, underestimating their potential and lowering their expectations²⁰.

- 86 The collective dimension, which has been here considered through the effects of school composition, has a major role on the personal educational experience of students and also plays a role in the social reproduction (Felouzis and Perroton 2009 p.99-100).

- 87 Low level school classes can have a negative influence on the educational and relational outcomes of students; at the same time, high level classes can also entail risks, especially in peripheral and working class areas. In this way, within high level classes there are mechanisms of sharp differentiation between the majority, who is able to follow the demanding educational pace and requirements, and those who lag behind.

- 88 These students very soon cease to pursue the same objectives as their classmates, with two possibilities: either they implement defence mechanisms, such as a disturbing

behaviour in the class, interfering with the continuation of educational activities. Or, they simply remain excluded, assuming a passive attitude towards the class and education in general, with serious consequences for the pursuit of their educational careers.

Conclusion

- 89 As we argued, the relationship between segregation and inequalities is a complex phenomenon; it has to be considered at various spatial levels and concerns different institutions and social practices.
- 90 The territorial configuration of social inequalities can increase and reproduce the existing inequalities based for instance on economic, social or ethnic variables, and reinforce them in a strong spatial and local dimension. First of all, because the local concentration and micro forms of inequalities are even more visible and subject to stigmatization. Secondly, because the absence of social mix does not contribute to the spreading of various, more positive role models and social capital and in this way, composition and peer effects can be very important. In Addition, segregated areas can also cumulate a structural disadvantage, related to the quality of public service provision.
- 91 School becomes a very decisive element counting, probably more than others, in the relationship between the spatial configuration of inequalities (segregation) and their reproduction. This is true in many countries, in Europe as in North America, but seems to be particularly the case of France, where school is at the very center of inequalities and social relations more generally.
- 92 This depends in part on some French peculiarities, concerning the societal model and the perception of education. French society is indeed characterized by a strong reference to its classical republican values. In particular, during the so-called Golden Age: a period starting after World War II and characterized by a great expansion of the Welfare. The State gave a great importance to school and education as fundamental tools for the Republican integration. It was true in the case of people of French origin and also for new citizens; of course not always in the same way.
- 93 Some important transformations, concerning in particular the socio-economic cycle, with a passage from an industrial to a postindustrial society and a consequent forced reshaping of all traditional configurations, changed the capacity of the State to guarantee everyone the proclaimed “Republican integration”. Or better said: this forced reconfiguration of the socio-economic cycle showed the existence of some negatives elements, such as inequalities that were previously less evident.
- 94 In this perspective, we can frame all those phenomena classified as “new forms of poverty” and the emergence of social inequalities.
- 95 Moreover, behind the Republican values, we can see how French society has a general and traditional tendency towards creating distinctions; something which is for example evident in the case of higher education and the *Grandes Écoles*. Such a distinction, became even more important and necessary in a period characterized by social insecurity (Castel 2004) in order to better compete and be safe from the risks of downward social mobility.

- 96 Therefore, this pushing towards distinction, shown through phenomena such as schooling strategies, can be framed in the general discourse on the crisis and impoverishment of the middle class (Chauvel, 2010).
- 97 However, this tendency towards distinction (Bourdieu 1984) is not just typical of higher social classes but seems, as a reaction, to be assumed also by those people concerned with social exclusion, who contribute in a way, through their self-segregation practices, to the reproduction of inequalities.
- « Tandis que les Français adeptes de l'exclusion culturelle marquent une très grande distance entre eux et le 'Français moyen', les Américains ont tendance à puiser dans une large gamme de répertoires culturels intégrant des éléments directement issues de la culture commune²¹ » (Lamont 1995, p.126).
- 98 As we argued in the article, educational segregation is a complex process putting together different dynamics. In particular: urban phenomena and other issues more typical of school and education. However, they are not completely differentiated but interact at the local level, taking new forms and mixing different elements at the same time: policy implementation - such as the *Carte Scolaire*; school functioning and regulations - such as expulsions or recruitment of "good students" through classes; and most importantly the schooling strategies of families, both those of the low and middle social classes.
- 99 As far as schooling strategies are concerned, as we specifically noticed in the last section, the general class and school level has significant effects on students' educational attainment. Through our empirical evidence, we showed how this process may increase during the academic career and cumulate disadvantages. At the same time, we saw how the educational experience does not simply influence school performances and results but more generally the personal development and trajectory of an individual. School is indeed a fundamental agency of socialization and through peer effects, which cannot always be considered negative; it strongly contributes to determine individual social trajectories.
- 100 As argued at the very beginning, family maintains a very strong role as a social (educational) determinant, although the modes of its action change and become more and more mediated by other elements such as local situations. This is for example the case of the search for a "good school" and even more: a school with a "good" and adequate public, in order to ensure children the best of all possible education and socialization.
- 101 In this new and complex frame family, becomes therefore a necessary but not sufficient condition for educational and social success. In fact, as we observed in the whole article, the school attended and the consequent peer group, gain more and more relevance.

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NOTES

1. Montreuil: a French town of about 100.000 inhabitants at the eastern outskirts of Paris. The area selected - the "Haut Montreuil" formed by the neighbourhoods of Ramenàs, Léo Lagrange, Branly-Boissière and Signac-Murs à Pêches - is a traditional working-class area, with a population of 30.000 inhabitants and a notable presence of immigrant origin households (in particular from Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa - Mali) and public housing projects. However, it is important to underline that significant transformations are taking place at both the socio-demographic and territorial level (Préteceille 2003, Cousin and Préteceille 2008) and some important forms of social mix are also registered. In this perspective the educational choices and strategies of households can be an even more interesting phenomenon.
2. The challenge for sociology of education (classic challenge in sociology, see Collins, 1981) is to combine the respective contributions of approaches, from 'macro' to 'micro', connecting individual interactions and statistical events, which constitute the various levels of the educational (and social) reality. All this requires an exploration of intermediate processes.
3. We took part to some public events, such as the end-of-year concert at the *Lycée Juan Jaures* or had access for two weeks to the school yard, during breaks. During school breaks in particular, I could better observe the behaviours, composition and interaction of different groups at school. It is quite interesting to see how very often the rationales and dynamics of local social relations are reproduced at school, for example, through segregation, lack of communication and interaction among people of different areas and, moreover, among different social or ethnic groups.
4. « il fatto di sgorgare dall'esperienza del mondo sociale » (Dal Lago, De Biasi 2002, p. XI)
5. Dal Lago, De Biasi 2002, p. XV.
6. Rankings and school results find a strong social translation concerning the social status of individuals and their chances to access to the best positions. Being the object of all criticisms, education continues to be the institution through which the (social) future of individuals is thought and imagined.
7. There are various and often subtle practices of higher and middle class households, in order to avoid those schools with a big concentration of immigrant or working class students, where streams and options are often unattractive and sometimes the learning conditions may be poor.
8. A specific curriculum at lower secondary school, proposing art and music alongside the regular school subjects.
9. Something that in the French debate goes under the name of "Évitement scolaire"
10. These data also question directly the ability of the *carte scolaire* to act on school social mix. Presented as a tool for fighting against school segregation, these results highlight its small impact on the practices of the middle and especially upper classes, suffering less for spatial constraints. On the contrary, the working class sees its space assignment (linked in the case of the most degraded neighborhoods to a strong stigma) as reinforced by school assignment which works much more effectively against them. This is the paradoxical effect of a measure, originally aiming at fighting against educational social inequalities (the social mix would be supposed to reduce the differences between social and academic institutions), and which turns to be unequal. In favor of the most privileged social classes.
11. The term is short for bourgeois and bohemian. We suggest the reader consult an interesting article by Rebecca Voight and published in 2000 on *The New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/14/news/14iht-rbobo.t.html>).
12. The *Lycée d'enseignement général* awards the *Baccalauréat de l'enseignement du second degré*. The *Lycée Technologique* awards the *Baccalauréat Technologique*. All Bac programmes are 3 years in length. Common curriculum in year 1, with students streamed in the final 2 years. The *Bac général*

is divided in *Scientifique, Littéraire, Economique et Social*. While the *Bac Technologique* has many more professionalizing specializations.

13. From the first year of collège (*sixième*) families can ask to send their children to classes with particular specializations: Latin, German, Cham (Programme d'enseignement des classes à horaires aménagés musicales), etc. However, these seem to be only apparent free choices, since they are socially structured. As demonstrated by Caillé (1996) for example: 26% of teachers' children, enjoying of a relatively high social capital, a very useful element in education, choose German as a second language, against 8% of workers' children. In accordance with the literature we can recognize how all these options respond to concrete strategies of distinction implemented by middle class families, which are at the same time reproduced by the lower social classes. Michelle Lamont recognizes this as a general tendency in French society, particularly evident in educational dynamics.

14. This is, for instance, what emerged from an important ethnographic study conducted during the nineties by Stéphane Beaud (2003) and resumed in a book entitled: "80% au bac et après?". This research, which loomed large in the French debate on education, shows how in France, starting from the end of eighties-beginning of the nineties, immigrant origin households over-invested, sometimes independently of results, in educational processes for their children, driving them towards a "Bac de filière générale".

15. When the situation is uncertain, the families of the working classes, being more sensitive to the risks of educational failures, are more cautious than other families. They renounce asking for a general stream, considered as more valuable, opting for a more professionalizing education (something which is however less true for foreign households). On the contrary, as far as 'average' students are concerned, only well-off families 'dare' asking the most valuable options. In general, these households' requests are highly considered by class boards, which tend to 'follow' their requests made. At the same time, without increasing the demands of those who are highly self-selected, councils endorse the social biases embedded in these requests.

16. Many of them [... young students of working class origin, without an economic or cultural heritage, have committed themselves, not always consciously in these 'long term' studies, pushed during the years 1985-1995 by a sort of democratization process involving secondary and higher education.

17. The *Grandes Ecoles* (literally in French "Great Schools") are higher education establishments, outside the main framework of the French university system. The *Grandes Ecoles* select students for admission based chiefly on national ranking in competitive written and oral exams. In contrast, French public universities have a legal obligation to accept all candidates of the region who hold a *baccalauréat*. They have traditionally produced many if not most of France's high-ranking civil servants, politicians and executives, as well as many scientists, writers and philosophers. Other *Grandes Ecoles* concentrate on a single subject area, such as engineering, sciences or business.

18. The ZEP: zones d'éducation prioritaires (ZEP) - priority education zones, are in the French system those areas in which are located schools (schools or colleges) receiving additional resources and greater autonomy to respond to the many educational and social difficulties cumulated there. These areas were established in 1981 in order to fight against the increasing school failure and social exclusion.

19. Information Nationale et régionale sur les formations et les métiers (www.onisep.fr).

20. Something which is very common among many of the young people we interviewed in Montreuil, is the fact of not having obtained the *Brevet de Collège*, a diploma issued at the end of lower secondary school.

21. While French people, suffering of cultural exclusion mark a great distance between them and the 'mid French', Americans tend to use a wide range of cultural repertoires, incorporating elements from the mainstream common culture.

ABSTRACTS

This article deals with the relationship between education and inequalities at the local level. We will observe how education, next to its role in social mobility, can also be a decisive element of social reproduction.

Our starting point is that the modes of social reproduction have changed during the years and for this reason, compared to the past, some of the mechanisms involved are less clear and evident. In this perspective, the main objective and challenge of this article is to outline, through a qualitative approach, some of the mechanisms of social reproduction of inequalities, taking place through education in France at the local level.

Cet article traite de la relation entre l'éducation et les inégalités au niveau local. Nous allons observer comment l'éducation, à côté de son rôle fondamental pour la mobilité sociale, peut aussi être un élément décisif pour la reproduction sociale.

Notre point de départ est que les modes de reproduction sociale ont changé au cours des années et pour cette raison, différemment que dans le passé, les mécanismes impliqués sont moins clairs et évidents. Dans cette perspective, l'objectif principal et le défi de cet article est de décrire, à travers une approche qualitative, certains des mécanismes de reproduction sociale des inégalités, qui se déroulent à travers l'éducation en France au niveau local.

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