Social inequality at school and educational policies

Marie Duru-Bellat

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Fundamentals of educational planning

The booklets in this series are written primarily for two types of clientele: those engaged in educational planning and administration, in developing as well as developed countries; and others, less specialized, such as senior government officials and policy-makers who seek a more general understanding of educational planning and of how it is related to overall national development. They are intended to be of use either for private study or in formal training programmes.

Since this series was launched in 1967 practices and concepts of educational planning have undergone substantial change. Many of the assumptions which underlay earlier attempts to rationalize the process of educational development have been criticized or abandoned. Even if rigid mandatory centralized planning has now clearly proven to be inappropriate, this does not mean that all forms of planning have been dispensed with. On the contrary, the need for collecting data, evaluating the efficiency of existing programmes, undertaking a wide range of studies, exploring the future and fostering broad debate on these bases to guide educational policy and decision-making has become even more acute than before. One cannot make sensible policy choices without assessing the present situation, specifying the goals to be reached, marshalling the means to attain them and monitoring what has been accomplished. Hence planning is also a way to organize learning: by mapping, targeting, acting and correcting.

The scope of educational planning has been broadened. In addition to the formal system of education, it is now applied to all other important educational efforts in non-formal settings. Attention to the growth and expansion of education systems is being complemented and sometimes even replaced by a growing concern for the quality of the entire educational process and for the control of its results. Finally, planners and administrators have become more and more aware of the importance of implementation strategies and of the role of different regulatory mechanisms in this respect: the choice of financing methods,
the examination and certification procedures or various other regulation and incentive structures. The concern of planners is twofold: to reach a better understanding of the validity of education in its own empirically observed specific dimensions and to help in defining appropriate strategies for change.

The purpose of these booklets includes monitoring the evolution and change in educational policies and their effect upon educational planning requirements; highlighting current issues of educational planning and analyzing them in the context of their historical and societal setting; and disseminating methodologies of planning which can be applied in the context of both the developed and the developing countries.

For policy-making and planning, vicarious experience is a potent source of learning: the problems others face, the objectives they seek, the routes they try, the results they arrive at and the unintended results they produce are worth analysis.

In order to help the Institute identify the real up-to-date issues in educational planning and policy-making in different parts of the world, an Editorial Board has been appointed, composed of two general editors and associate editors from different regions, all professionals of high repute in their own field. At the first meeting of this new Editorial Board in January 1990, its members identified key topics to be covered in the coming issues under the following headings:

1. Education and development.
2. Equity considerations.
3. Quality of education.
4. Structure, administration and management of education.
5. Curriculum.
6. Cost and financing of education.
7. Planning techniques and approaches.
8. Information systems, monitoring and evaluation.
Each heading is covered by one or two associate editors.

The series has been carefully planned but no attempt has been made to avoid differences or even contradictions in the views expressed by the authors. The Institute itself does not wish to impose any official doctrine. Thus, while the views are the responsibility of the authors and may not always be shared by UNESCO or the IIEP, they warrant attention in the international forum of ideas. Indeed, one of the purposes of this series is to reflect a diversity of experience and opinions by giving different authors from a wide range of backgrounds and disciplines the opportunity of expressing their views on changing theories and practices in educational planning.

Since the early 1980s, societies have become increasingly concerned with the rapid progress of technology and the prospects it holds for the future in facilitating all aspects of life: work, leisure and education.

The integration of computers and technology into schools is an expensive and sometimes complex process. It requires all the necessary equipment, competent staff to get it up and running, technical support, and teaching of others to use it correctly and effectively. However, its advantages are evident, and the benefits that it can bring to schools and their pupils are significant enough to make the introduction of technology into the classroom one of the priorities of educational planners in both developed and developing countries, although the challenges and obstacles that may need to be overcome in both of these settings can be quite different.

The subject of inequality was very much to the forefront of the debate on education in the industrialized countries in the 1960s and 1970s. There were high hopes that education would make for greater economic and social mobility and thus lead to a reduction in inequalities. Major studies, such as the Coleman Report (1966) in the United States, or the research conducted by Bourdieu in France (1970), somewhat undermined this conviction when they demonstrated the dominant influence of socio-economic background on inequalities at school and in the ‘reproduction’ of social inequality. Inequality in the area of access has certainly been reduced with the increase in the length of
school education, but there are still marked inequalities in attainment at school, in the branches or types of education to which children or young people are allocated, and in access to the labour market. Many programmes have been introduced but with results that have sometimes fallen short of what was hoped.

In the developing countries, there are still very marked inequalities between the sexes, urban and rural areas, regions, and socio-professional groups, in terms of access to primary and secondary education and in teaching conditions, the level of attainment at school and the possibility of pursuing further studies. In recent years, debate at international level has focused on the issue of inequalities between the sexes, as well as on the fight against exclusion and poverty, as if socio-economic inequality was inevitable and only poverty and exclusion were intolerable. Yet the fight against exclusion and poverty, respectively, are very closely related. The present monograph by Marie Duru-Bellat, who is Professor of Education at the University of Burgundy, seeks to take stock of what is known at the outset of the twenty-first century on this important and sensitive issue. At what levels do inequalities at school develop? To what factors should they mainly be attributed? What part can schools and educational policy play in redressing social inequality? What programmes has it been possible to implement that have had an impact? Such are the questions raised by all educational planners and which the author seeks to answer on the basis of extensive research undertaken in France and other developed countries. Her discriminating recommendations and conclusions will provide food for thought on the part of all those concerned with reducing inequality. The Institute is grateful to Marie Duru-Bellat for this interesting contribution, as well as to François Orivel, Professor at the University of Burgundy, for his involvement as Associate Editor responsible for the present publication.

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Preface

Study of the social inequalities encountered at school has occurred in two phases. The first corresponds to a period during which the development of education systems was focused on increasing the duration of school education. During this phase, it was generally apparent that access to school tended to reflect the social background of pupils. The children first to benefit from easier access and/or the longer period of schooling came from privileged social classes; depending on the country concerned, a certain period of time was then required for those from poorer backgrounds to catch up. Indeed, the phenomenon was one that recurred wherever a particular level of education was affected by so-called ‘massification’. Thus inequalities were first noted in access to primary school when the development of education systems got under way; then, similarly, in the first (lower) stage of secondary education; then in the second (upper) stage; and finally in higher education. The most effective policies for reducing inequalities in access have always consisted in the expansion of public-sector schooling at times when little cost to families has been entailed.

In the developed countries, inequalities in access to primary education are now non-existent. This is becoming the case also in secondary education, particularly at lower secondary level, but such inequalities still exist in upper secondary and higher education, even though they tend to be decreasing almost everywhere. In the developing countries, situations appear to contrast sharply, but, in those which are the poorest, inequalities in access to primary education are today still very marked.

The second phase of investigation has no longer been concerned with problems of access, but with inequalities in attainment. This issue may be considered from two angles: either children from poor backgrounds are more often excluded as they progress from lower to higher levels because they do not satisfy the academic requirements for admission to a particular level; or, alternatively, they are more
frequently led to opt for branches or types of educational provision regarded as inferior in terms of academic performance. Some writers refer to quantitative inequalities in the case of the first scenario, and to qualitative inequalities in the case of the second. School attendance is therefore an insufficient condition for eliminating inequality at school. Steps also have to be taken to ensure that the chances that children will do well are not compromised by their social background.

Contemporary research remains dominated by the study of qualitative inequality, even if in the developing countries the issue of quantitative inequalities is far from being resolved. The present monograph by Professor Marie Duru-Bellat is naturally part of this general trend and constitutes one of the very few available overviews of the whole topic. It is entirely consistent with the aims of the Fundamentals of educational planning series to which it contributes, and sets out to discuss complex questions using language that is readily accessible, not just to professional researchers, but to practitioners who need to understand the issues underlying the modern educational policies in which they are the players. The study illustrates perfectly the difficulty of implementing policies for education that eliminate qualitative inequality. It reaches conclusions similar to those of an earlier work by Blossfeld and Shavit (1993), which was concerned exclusively with the education systems of the developed countries and which demonstrated that inequalities in terms of access and attainment do not decrease (or do so insufficiently) over time, despite the existence of educational policy measures intended to combat them.

Notwithstanding the attempt by Professor Duru-Bellat to single out studies concerned with the situation in developing countries, there is a disappointing dearth of relevant material. Studies of this kind would be all the more interesting in that a worsening of inequality cannot be ruled out. Many developing countries are young countries in which education systems have only recently been established. The first generations of pupils have not been selected as a result of their social background, but rather in the light of restrictions imposed by insufficient provision. It may be said that there were relatively weak links between access and social background in the case of those first generations, as the great majority of their parents were illiterate. This
Preface

no longer applies to the second generations. The children of educated parents in the first wave probably enjoy better career prospects than do the children of ‘non-educated’ parents. They are the first to benefit from education of long duration, which they often receive in private primary or secondary institutions which have better facilities than the public sector schools, and receive stronger support from their families.

The present study clearly illustrates why policies intended to reduce qualitative inequalities are less effective than were those that sought to achieve greater quantitative equality: qualitative inequalities are governed less by action on the part of the public authorities, since they are created mainly by differing family behaviour patterns. In other words, they are inequalities whose underlying causes are harder to manipulate. Only overt policies for discrimination (in favour of children from poor backgrounds) can provide an effective counterweight to this natural trend. But, besides the fact that they call for unusual political determination, some of them have left bitter memories, especially in countries that introduced explicit systems of discrimination (as in the case, for example, of the former Soviet Union).

The publication of this monograph could not be more timely. It revives a debate that had a tendency to be overlooked. It sets out what is well known alongside what is less familiar or totally unfamiliar. May it contribute to renewed fresh research into a subject crucial to the concerns of educational policy-makers throughout the world.

François Orivel
Associate Editor
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International Institute for Educational Planning    www.unesco.org/iiep
List of abbreviations

IEA International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
IIEP International Institute for Educational Planning
PISA Programme for International Student Assessment
OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
I. Introduction

The issue of social inequality encountered at school is important in all democratic countries. This is, first, because schools are expected to bring together an entire age-group and distribute social positions in accordance with the skills of each person. In societies based on the principle of equality, meritocracy (selection on the basis of merit) is the mainspring of social hierarchies: access to positions of unequal level may only be justified by the existence of dissimilar qualities revealed at school, and not as a result of assets inherited by children from their family environment. Equality of opportunity at school thus becomes the aim pursued with a view to ensuring equality of opportunity in access to various social positions and, in particular, that elites are established on democratic principles.

Furthermore, “to extend the benefits of education to all makes economic sense as much as it accords with social and educational equity” (OECD, 1992: 33-34): Any regularly encountered social inequality in access to education and training is a waste of valuable talents, whereas meritocracy, conversely, guarantees efficiency.

Given the important economic and ideological implications of this issue, extensive research has been carried out on the origin of social inequalities at school, and how school and family-related factors may contribute to them. Yet while the great majority of young people who attend school do so in poor countries, by far the greater share of research into education is conducted in rich countries. How far its findings apply to countries that are less economically advanced or very different in cultural terms is clearly problematic. Some research (for example Heyneman and Loxley, 1983) reveals that variables which have a major impact in rich countries (such as social background) are far less significant in the poorest countries for a variety of reasons. One of them is that their impact is overwhelmed by the influence of other factors (for example the material resources for education), which may vary over a far broader range. On the other hand, it is unlikely
that the mass of findings and analytical material available would have no value whatever outside their immediate context. The present study sets out to demonstrate that the most reliable and instructive research carried out in some rich countries (reference will be made in the great majority of cases to work concerned with OECD countries) may provide general insights into the origins of social inequality at school, and into the effects of the various educational policies intended to counter it. One thing is certain (and, without doubt, most important of all): This research may be used to identify a set of questions, observations and ideas for further consideration prior to taking any political action in this area.

The first chapter will begin by assessing the scale of different forms of social inequality, their chronological stages, and their various characteristics. The second and third chapters will then go on to examine the factors that give rise to them, whether in the family or school environment. Finally, the last two chapters will review the various policies aimed at reducing these inequalities, their approaches and methods, and their impact. It should also be noted that this monograph concentrates on inequalities deriving from children’s family environment as perceived in terms of the income, level of education and social position of their parents. Inequalities associated with distinctions of sex or ethnic origin will be referred to only in passing and not dealt with systematically, as research suggests that they derive from clearly different processes.
II. The prevalence, chronological development and dimensions of social inequality at school

In all countries, the school careers of pupils assume a wide variety of forms. In the industrialized countries, this variety is reflected in curricula that differ significantly in length, subsequent to the completion of compulsory education. As this occurs between the ages of 14 and 18 depending on the country concerned, it is justifiable to concentrate here on inequalities in access to upper secondary education. It is in this context of inequality among pupils that social inequalities will become apparent, and they will be less marked where the former is only slight.

Inequalities in access and attainment

A first general approach to inequality involves comparing young people’s rates of access to different levels of education with respect to their socio-economic background. In the OECD countries, this results in the finding that there is a strong correlation between the probability of a young person obtaining a university degree and the qualification held by his or her parents; this probability may vary from 1 to 2 or, sometimes, from 1 to 6, depending on whether the parents failed to complete upper secondary education or, on the contrary, themselves studied at university level. This surplus educational opportunity dependent on having a graduate parent, which testifies to strong ‘cultural reproduction’, is far more marked in some countries, such as Switzerland or Poland, than in others, such as Sweden or Australia.

Yet these figures, which associate the circumstances of parents with those of their children, should be interpreted with care. Estimates of inequality derived from them depend both on the scale of school enrolments in the countries concerned and on the impact of the social environment on access at each particular level of education. Consequently, a country with higher school enrolments will tend to have a lower overall level of inequality than another country which is
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more Malthusian in this respect, without the situation pointing to foregone conclusions in either case about the impact of social inequalities attributable to the way family ties or education systems actually operate.

Furthermore, while these figures reflect the state of school provision, they derive from three very different phenomena. These are, first, the fact that individual pupils have – or have not – had an opportunity to access a particular level of education; next, that they have at least managed to get by academically; and, finally, that they have wanted and been able (with varying degrees of success) to turn this achievement to good account by embarking on the longest and most prestigious branches or courses of study. In all countries, a customary distinction has been established (since Coleman et al., 1966) between inequalities in access to education and inequalities in the attainment of pupils actually attending school. In the richest countries, in which school education is of a longer duration, there is now greater emphasis on the distinction between inequality of attainment in the strict sense and inequalities in access to branches or types of provision within increasingly diversified systems, with social inequalities generally persisting in access to higher education. In the third chapter we shall return to another aspect of social inequality, namely access to an educational environment of variable quality (referred to by some as ‘inequality of treatment’), which may affect academic attainment just as much as attitudes towards school and, by the same token, the types of education on which young people embark.

In economically advanced countries, social inequality in school career terms may be attributed in equal measure to inequalities in school attainment and inequalities stemming from the type of education that young people choose or are advised to pursue (see, for example, Erikson and Jonsson, 1996, in relation to Sweden, and Duru-Bellat, 2002, for France).

It is on social inequalities in school attainment that comparative data are most plentiful. Indeed, extensive international surveys regularly review the achievements (and sometimes the attitudes) of pupils by means of standardized testing. While these tests are devised to ensure their results will be readily comparable, it is known that social
inequalities reflected in the results of standard knowledge testing are slightly less marked than in the case of school assessment, and slightly more so than when psychometric tests are used. In all international surveys of pupil achievement organized by the IEA (the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), a relation is always observed between achievement and social background, which seems to have grown even stronger since the 1970s (see the summary by Keeves, 1995). In the most recent survey by PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment; OECD, 2001 and 2003), the skills demonstrated by 15-year-old pupils in all countries vary as a matter of course in accordance with their social background. This applies just as much to their reading literacy as to their mathematical or scientific literacy. The same relation between family background and children’s performance is observed in less developed countries, such as those of Latin America (Willms and Somers, 2001).

However, the advantage attributable to the social environment varies depending on the country concerned. While, to quote PISA data again, on average, social background accounts for 20 per cent of the variation in pupil performance in reading literacy, this figure varies very markedly from one country to the next. It is very low in the northern countries (5 per cent in Iceland) or in those of Asia (6 per cent in Japan). Conversely, it is higher (over 20 per cent) in the central European or Germanic countries (such as Hungary or Luxembourg), or yet again in some poorer countries (such as Argentina or Peru). It should be noted that there is nothing fundamentally inevitable about this state of affairs, since the degree of variance attributable to social background is always fairly low.

One must emphasize that these inequalities among pupils are reflected in very variable test score levels, so much so that the most disadvantaged pupils in some countries (such as Korea or Finland, which achieve a high average level but are also relatively socially and culturally uniform) perform better than the most privileged pupils in other countries (such as Luxembourg). A disadvantageous social environment is not therefore incompatible with entirely satisfactory performance and, in this respect, the way the education system is actually organized is doubtless of some significance (OECD, 2001 and 2003).
It should also be noted that there are countries in which the performance of pupils is of a high level and relatively little affected by social background (Canada, Korea, Finland, etc.). Conversely, in certain countries (such as Germany, Luxembourg, Argentina or Peru), their performance is, on average, rather weak and reflects social inequality to a relatively greater extent than in all countries taking part in PISA. Similarly, in Latin America, the country that achieves the best performance (Cuba) is also the one in which social inequality is least marked (Willms and Somers, 2001). More effective performance should not, therefore, necessarily be equated with greater inequality, and vice versa. It should further be noted that just as there is no clear trade-off between effectiveness and equity, neither is there any relation between the selectivity of the system and the attainment of the educational elite: the top 10 per cent of pupils in a country do not perform better in cases in which only small numbers secure access to the level of education under consideration. It may also be pointed out that variations in performance from one country to the next are most marked in the case of weak pupils and/or those from relatively poor backgrounds, which suggests – as we shall discuss further in due course – that they are more likely to be affected by the educational context.

The gradual accumulation of social inequality

PISA attainment measurements are cross-sectional. They relate to 15-year-olds who have received several years of schooling, during which various inequalities have accumulated. For example in some OECD surveys it has been noted that between the fourth and eighth year of schooling, the difference between pupils increases to a greater or lesser extent depending on the country concerned, which indicates that it is not inevitable that schools should allow such variations to develop. The same applies to social inequality, and inequalities of this kind may be expected to accumulate over time if circumstances are such that school attendance does not gradually reduce inequalities evident at the outset. One might also expect that, even if inequalities strictly related to attainment at school diminish at each successive stage of selection, types of inequality more closely associated with the choice of course options or distinct branches of education would
The prevalence, chronological development and dimensions of social inequality at school

increase during the period spent at school. What actually happens in practice?

A helpful starting point is an initial observation of the scale of social differentiation when children enter nursery school. English language sources (Nash, 2001) consider that at this point the variation in intellectual development between the children of the most highly skilled and those of the least skilled workers respectively is of the order of over one standard deviation. A difference of one standard deviation means that around 85 per cent of children from families with the least skilled parents are at a level lower than the mean for children from the most favourably positioned families, whereas if the two groups were at the same level the corresponding figure would be just 50 per cent. Yet it should be emphasized that, in spite of this deviation, there is substantial overlap between the two curves, and the majority of children in one group thus achieve scores comparable to those in the other.

In France, the first signs of social and sex-based inequality at school are observed when children are aged between four and five. Inequalities are the most marked in verbal logic, with a 1.2 standard deviation between the children of parents in the (middle or top level) managerial classes and those of unskilled workers, whereas such socially distinctive variations are also significant, though a little less marked, in other cognitive attributes (ability to draw, an appreciation of the dimensions of space and time). Such disparities do not diminish – they even grow slightly – as a result of attending nursery school. There is thus no compensation for what is referred to as the ‘better start’, even when children begin school very early. This is also attributable to the fact that all children benefit from early pre-school provision, irrespective of their social background. Nevertheless, the findings of research assessing the impact of day-care facilities for children prior to compulsory education remain somewhat inconsistent. Even though, overall, they generally have a positive effect on performance at school, especially in the countries of northern Europe or Latin America (see, for example, Andersson, 1989), such facilities may be more or less beneficial to the development of very young children, depending on how they are organized in practice and the
content of what they provide. In particular, they have a more regularly positive impact on the capacity of children to adapt socially than on their linguistic development. Their impact in terms of reducing social inequality will thus also vary, and the overall influence of various forms of pre-school day care will remain far weaker than that of the educational level of a child’s mother.

This accumulation becomes more marked in primary education, in which the cumulative nature of learning is very clear: The best indicator of what is definitely learnt on completion of any particular year is thus what was learnt in the preceding year. Some French research dealing with the first year of primary school notes that the overall level of attainment at the beginning of the school year accounts for between 41-50 per cent of the variance in attainment at the end of the year (Mingat, 1991). Yet these preceding achievements are not unrelated to the socially distinctive attributes of the child concerned. Social background alone accounts for around 15-20 per cent of the variance in initial attainment, in France but also in the United Kingdom (Sammons, 1995). Early apparent social inequalities are thus partly reflected in achievement at school. Even though the specific influence of social background over progress in a single year seems slight, it gradually becomes an integral aspect of school attainment, which will be the main factor governing progress to the next level. In other words, social inequalities established among pupils at one level will exert a persistent influence via the level of attainment they have achieved by the time they begin the following school year.

Furthermore, specific social inequalities will also become more marked during the summer holidays as a result of the differing effectiveness of family strategies for sustaining or strengthening the progress of their children at school. Inequalities thus increase steadily throughout the whole of their education, although this admittedly applies more in the case of the mother tongue than in mathematics; a subject in which there is less social differentiation and the influence of school-related factors is more acute.

The steady accumulation of inequalities appears to accelerate when children move on to lower secondary education (Sammons, 1995,
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with reference to the United Kingdom, and Duru-Bellat, 2002, to France). Children start this new stage of their education from very different levels: For example at the beginning of the first year of this stage in France – the so-called sixième (sixth) class – the top 10 per cent of pupils in mathematics and French achieve levels of performance around three times higher than those of the bottom 10 per cent, bearing in mind that social background is once more related to this disparity in attainment (although it is far from being the sole explanation for it). Moreover, initial attainment levels and social background affect subsequent progress through school very significantly: Pupils who are initially the best (and/or from a privileged social background) gain more from their early years in secondary education to such an extent that as much social inequality is generated in two years as throughout the whole of primary education.

The growing importance of family strategies

Furthermore, from entry to lower secondary education onwards, scope for choice (of branches or types of provision or course) is apparent in most countries, and the choices made will usually differ depending on the social background of the pupils. In countries such as Germany, in which distinct branches of provision exist from the point of entry to secondary education onwards, access to the long traditional stream of the Gymnasium displays a high correlation with the cultural level of children’s families (higher than the correlation with the level of family resources). In countries in which the initial separation into different branches occurs at a later stage, as in Spain, Sweden or France, the choice of pursuing technical and vocational branches ranks as a second preference among pupils aged 14-16, attracting more frequently working-class children, with the general streams being the most highly regarded. The choice of particular subjects or courses within a given branch or stream has less serious consequences, but may preclude certain study options and, more particularly, lead to pupils being sorted into ability-classes. In general, scientific and language courses are regarded as more prestigious than vocational ones, and are offered in better level schools or groups. It should be remembered that in many countries (such as the United Kingdom and Sweden), social inequalities associated with the kind of
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studies chosen have an equivalent impact on the schooling career as that of differences in academic attainment per se. Similarly, in many countries it is also apparent that each time children of comparable attainment have to choose a particular branch or type of education, those from working-class backgrounds are less ambitious in their decisions (particularly where their level of attainment is mediocre), or more readily accept the often cautious recommendations of their teachers in such cases to not be overly ambitious.

Behaviour patterns of this kind reveal that self-confidence and confidence in the ability of one’s own child tends to vary from one family to the next. It is stronger among the financially comfortable and well-educated, while, conversely, the behaviour of working-class families tends to be more rigorously self-selective, leading them to eliminate themselves those options they perceive to be the riskiest. In fact, there is a strategic aspect to all such choices in the school rivalry that begins in secondary education, and underlying all of them is a search for distinction, the aim being to offer one’s own child something that others lack.

The further one progresses through school, the more significant these social differences in strategy and types of choice will become, at a level of education (secondary) which has grown in diversity as it has rapidly expanded to cater for many more young people, encouraging them to specialize to an increasing extent. Conversely, social inequalities associated with attainment become less obvious. As far as higher education is concerned, the various branches are very socially distinctive, but any form of social inequality in academic attainment within a given branch is often no longer perceptible. On the other hand, social distinctions are still reflected in the choices of students following school failure: the least privileged tend to discontinue their studies, whereas the most privileged turn to other options.

Different aspects of the social environment

It is clear from the above that, in the industrialized countries, findings on the impact of social background on preferred types of education tend to be similar. Where these findings sometimes differ is
in their view of which aspects of social background are the most
determinant. In most research, the occupation of the father is taken to
be an all-round indicator of a child’s social background (as it
encapsulates several aspects such as material living conditions and the
cultural environment, etc.). Examining separately the influence of each
individual aspect of family background calls for multivariate analysis.
On the other hand, caution needs to be exercised when considering a
simple direct relationship between a child’s attainment and just one
such aspect, as, for example, in a perceived correlation between the
fact that the child concerned comes from a large family or speaks a
different language at home from the one spoken at school and – in
this particular example – lower attainment. In fact, both of these
characteristics of family environment are themselves closely related
to the occupation of the father, to which the observed correlations
may be very largely attributed and to a far greater extent than the size
or language of the family in their own right.

It is uncommon for research to take account of family material
resources per se. Yet, over and above the impact of parental
occupation, the income level of parents exerts a distinct influence on
how children perform at school, which tends to be negative where
income is low. In all OECD countries (OECD, 2001), there is a
correlation between the performance of 15-year-olds and their various
material family possessions (a desk, computers, dictionaries, etc.),
but this influence is weaker than in the case of parental occupation,
and far stronger in some countries (for example the United States)
than in others (such as the Scandinavian countries). The same survey
also reveals a positive correlation between cultural possessions (classic
or well-established books, items of artistic interest, etc.) or certain
forms of cultural practice (going to museums, concerts, the theatre,
etc.) and pupil performance – a correlation which is stronger in the
case of reading literacy than mathematical literacy. In the (poorer)
countries of Latin America, having a minimum of 10 books in the
home appears to be very closely related to children’s attainment (Willms
and Somers, 2001). However, whatever its precise form, this kind of
stark correlation (whose significance will in any case vary depending
on the country concerned) may relate back to other family
characteristics, and especially the level of education of the parents.
Some research strives to separate a material component in family background from a cultural component by bringing both the occupation and educational level of one or both parents into its investigation at the same time. By isolating the significance of the occupational factor from that of educational level, the former relates solely to material aspects of the family, dissociating them from the possible effect of cultural aspects. In general, the occupation of a child’s father and his level of education each exert a specific influence when included simultaneously in any single model for explaining performance or progress at school. On the other hand, their relative impact varies depending on the country concerned. In the Netherlands (de Graaf, de Graff and Kraaykamp, 2000) and the United Kingdom (Sullivan, 2001), the specific effect of the father’s occupation appears stronger than that of his level of education, but this is not the case in Italy and many Latin American countries, where the parental level of education seems clearly to be the decisive variable. Yet the view sometimes expressed that growing prosperity tends to lessen the influence of material resources on the progress of children at school and thereby increase the impact of cultural resources is not – or not yet – borne out by the facts.

When the level of education of the mother is also included, this factor too is significant in its own right (over and above characteristics associated with the father), especially as regards performance in the native language, with often higher coefficients than those of the father’s educational level (although in models in which the mother’s occupation does not appear as a separate variable, which doubtless increases the value of the coefficient for ‘educational level’). Thus in all OECD countries, young people with mothers who have completed upper secondary education are likely to perform better in terms of reading literacy (at the age of 15), and better still if their mother has been to university. Conversely, the performance of those whose mothers have not completed secondary education is significantly weaker. Yet, once more, the extent to which this advantage is determinant varies from one country to the next (so that it is stronger in countries as dissimilar as Germany and Mexico than in the countries of northern Europe); and in certain countries with high average performances pupils score close to the OECD average, even when their mothers are not highly educated.
The prevalence, chronological development and dimensions of social inequality at school

As regards the influence of the mother’s occupation, it would appear to vary depending on the country concerned (Duru-Bellat and van Zanten, 2000). In European countries, children with mothers who work sometimes – depending on the grade – do relatively better at school, and hardly ever do relatively worse. In the United States the findings stand in greater contrast, with boys from average or privileged social backgrounds often achieving less impressive results while their peers from working-class backgrounds, as well as girls as a whole, do better. But in all cases, the educational level of the mother definitely remains a more important factor than whether she has an occupation.

International surveys regularly consider how far speaking a language in the home other than the language of instruction at school – or, more broadly, the fact that a child is of foreign origin – may amount to a handicap. Poorer performances are indeed observed under such circumstances, though to a variable extent depending on the country concerned, especially among young people who, like their parents, were born in a country other than the one in which they now attend school. However, in order to investigate this handicap more closely, there is a need to separate whatever is linked, on the one hand, to the fact in itself that certain young people are of foreign origin and, on the other, to their generally rather disadvantaged social backgrounds. Surveys that use multivariate modelling to provide for this type of distinction conclude either that foreign pupils from a social background comparable to that of native pupils suffer no particular handicap, or that pupils in certain ethnic groups learn even more effectively. This applies in particular to the end of compulsory education in Great Britain (Sammons, 1995), and is reminiscent also of the situation of pupils of Asian origin in the United States.

Findings regarding family structure should be treated with similar caution. In considering the influence (in most cases negative) of numerous siblings, one should reckon with whatever relates to the fact that large families are more widespread among the less well-to-do. Indeed, the presence of many siblings would only appear to have a (negative) influence on school attainment in working-class families. Similarly, the somewhat limited negative impact that belonging to a single-parent family appears to have on school performance at the age of 15 (according to PISA in particular) is partly attributable to the
fact that such families are often at lower socio-economic levels. The truth is that living in a single-parent family, or one whose members have changed (a situation that affects between one young person in five and one in ten in the countries surveyed by PISA), apparently has a bearing above all on the length of children’s education and not on the attainment of those children in its own right (assuming that other relevant characteristics remain comparable).

In the final analysis, all these various family characteristics (among which the educational level of parents seems to be the most determinant) act in combination with an effect that is often cumulative. In the United Kingdom, Sammons (1995) considers, for example, that the probability that a pupil aged 11 will be in the weakest group in verbal reasoning increases from 11 per cent to 92 per cent, depending on whether the child concerned is free from – or, on the contrary, burdened with – a maximum number of risk factors, which include having one or two parents who are unskilled or unemployed, coming from a single-parent or a large family, or being of a foreign ethnic origin, etc.

It should be emphasized that the impact of these various factors rooted in family circumstances is relative (there are countries, for example, in which even pupils with mothers who are poorly educated score high with respect to the international average), which leads one to believe that other more general educational or social factors may compensate for parents with a low level of education or other adverse characteristics in the family environment. And this is why these studies are most inappropriate for comparative purposes. They invite one to draw firm conclusions, notwithstanding the fact that, in the countries considered, few things are readily comparable and that attention should be focused primarily on the pattern of all such factors as a whole. Nonetheless, the gathering and recording of data on aspects of the social environment that ‘make a difference’ is a first step in understanding the origins of social inequality at school. Further progress calls for closer direct investigation of the family environment, and then of that of the school and classroom.
III. Origins in the family of inequality at school

Children’s parents are supposed to be both their first educators and their loyal supporters throughout their school career. Sociologists will seek to account for inequalities in attainment or the chosen path through education in terms of the variety of ways in which families bring up their children. By the same token they are wary of invoking psychological factors (inequalities in intellectual potential or ability), as they find it hard to see why such factors should vary so regularly from one social group to the next. But, true to their professional convictions, they are also concerned not to slide into a ‘deficit-related sociology’, which might invoke inadequacies in the family environment to explain the difficulties of children from working-class backgrounds. Inspired in particular by the theories of French sociologists Bourdieu and Passeron (1970), which have been widely circulated in Europe, most interest has thus tended to focus not so much on differences in forms of family socialization themselves and their consequences as on how those differences clash with the school as an institution.

The ‘unequal distance’ and inequalities in attainment

Bourdieu and Passeron have sought to determine the part played in the origins of social inequality by the ‘unequal distance’ which they believe exists between the culture (or language) of some children and what is expected of them at school. In the view of Bourdieu and Passeron, school curricula and requirements are permeated by the culture of dominant groups to such an extent that only those who inherit that culture from their parents can do well. While school puts inequalities in attainment down to unequal levels of ability, it is the inequalities in the distance between the different cultures and the school culture that is the real issue. School itself therefore transforms cultural differences into unequal levels of attainment. These theories, which were popularized in the 1970s (and, as it happens, developed primarily on the basis of research into higher education), have yet to be confirmed by contemporary sociological research.
Several studies (such as those of de Graaf et al., 2000; Sullivan, 2001) confirm that the educational level of the father and mother, their cultural preferences and activities and those of their children are indeed linked by a causal relationship. In other words, the influence of the parental level of education corresponds to the transmission of a ‘cultural inheritance’. The point at which research findings really begin to differ is when one seeks to attribute an operational significance to the concept of cultural inheritance and analyze it meaningfully by considering the precise resources that children might first inherit and then turn to good account at school (thereby justifying use of the term ‘cultural capital’). A distinction may be drawn between, on the one hand, becoming familiar with a certain number of cultural practices (concerts, the theatre, arts and classical music, etc.) and, on the other, customary practice as regards reading and the use of television. Both in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom the most refined cultural practices have little specific impact on children’s attainment, whereas reading and watching television are far more influential in this respect, especially as children acquire from doing these activities a certain vocabulary and various kinds of knowledge. The beneficial effect of reading among parents, in particular, is a very general finding (in European countries and in Latin America). The key point to emphasize is that the cultural activity of parents appears to be consequential, primarily because, when taken up by children, it endows them with differing levels of ability; the ‘unequal distance’ between family culture and school culture would seem to be of only secondary significance, which varies, moreover, depending on the country concerned. It is possible that school curricula in certain countries (such as those of northern Europe and the United Kingdom) are such that it is harder to exploit at school whatever is acquired from conventional cultural practices than it is in countries that attach considerable importance to the humanities, such as France and perhaps also the countries of southern and eastern Europe. Yet, in the northern countries at least, social inequalities in performance at school are not just less marked, but are also less dependent on the possession of cultural attributes or activities associated with classical culture (OECD, 2001). This may perhaps be explained by the fact that curricula in those countries are more geared towards skills required in everyday life than towards the
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historical heritage or the most abstract or disinterested aspects of academic subject matter. The content of school curricula may thus itself tend to nurture social inequality to a greater or lesser extent from one country to the next.

Other findings from most countries offer little support to the ‘unequal distance’ hypothesis. Thus the fact that social inequalities in progress through school become apparent from nursery school, and the most rudimentary learning activity onwards indicates very clearly that culturally elitist content is not the only consideration at issue. Furthermore, differing attainment levels in mathematics are often just as significant as difficulty with the mother tongue. In France it has been demonstrated that these early dissimilarities relate to matters such as spatial awareness or geometry, which, on the face of it, should be less dependent on any cultural inheritance. Similarly, if cultural inheritance is highly significant, it is somewhat surprising that foreign children or those of immigrant origin encounter hardly any specific difficulties (beyond those relating to their position in a socially disadvantageous environment), or why the children of farmers do far better on average than those of industrial workers – findings which are applicable to many countries.

Parental practices whose educational impact is dissimilar

From the foregoing, one cannot dismiss the hypothesis that parents endow their children with unequal cognitive skills depending on their social background. This is first because, unless inequalities between families are regarded as having no importance whatever, they are expected to have repercussions on numerous aspects of daily routine (in particular via the space or cultural and material resources available). And, secondly, because psychologists now agree that childhood development is, from the outset, a social phenomenon (in addition to whatever is hereditarily transmitted, which after all remains hard to evaluate), with the result that the educational practices of parents necessarily affect the cognitive development of their children. Just as disparities in living conditions give rise to differing states of health, it would appear that certain aspects of these differentiated forms of
socialization are such that not all children are similarly prepared for the requirements of school and, perhaps also, that there are significant differences in their levels of cognitive development or acquisition of more general skills.

In particular, it is now well known that adaptable and flexible educational practices, or encouraging children to explore their surroundings freely and consider the results of their own actions, have a positive effect on intellectual development. Yet these practices are closely related to the socio-cultural level of the parents, and the way in which they discipline their children.1 Furthermore, depending on the particular educational environment, parents will not teach their child to feel responsible for what happens to him or her to the same extent. In the case of both themselves and their child, the most educated parents are most persuaded that what lies in store for them does not depend merely on fate or ungovernable factors, but on their actions. They thus develop greater confidence in themselves and in their child, and this general attitude of ‘control from within’ and self-confidence are, in the final analysis, linked to educational achievement at school. Furthermore, the extent to which parents encourage their children to remain disciplined and pay attention varies, which has implications for their behaviour in the classroom and, by the same token, their school attainment. They also exert at least some degree of pressure on their children in many areas (pressure to perform well and be active, intellectual pressure, encouraging them to be independent and use the language appropriately) which combine to develop an environment that will be more stimulating in some cases than in others (cf. the Marjoribanks’ synthesis, 1996).

More specifically, the extent to which parents, for example, stimulate their children to use language to argue or negotiate, or to analyze what they do, differs and these various social uses of language are unequally adapted to optimal assimilation of what is learnt at school. Certain forms of linguistic socialization may thus give children a sense of inferiority or, on the contrary, prepare them for what school requires.

1. References for the cited research on parental education practice is contained in Duru-Bellat and van Zanten, 2000.
This might apply, for example, to the use of questions when parents interact with their children for explicitly educational purposes (to stimulate them and bring them into adult conversation, rather than to obtain consequential information).

In more abstract terms, certain French sociologists such as Lahire (1993), in keeping with the theory of Bourdieu and Passeron, emphasize that the school requires that the relationship with the language be a reflective one that is closer to the written medium and is itself sustained by the dominance exercised by those who master it over everyone else. This relationship with language, which materializes in many school exercises to develop phonological awareness, will cause problems for children who are unprepared to come to grips with language in a way that is disassociated from their personal experience, and manipulate it as an independent entity. This tends to be the situation of children from the least educated backgrounds. From this standpoint, the existence of differing levels of ability (the outcome of socialization) that constitute real barriers to learning becomes less significant in accounting for social inequality than the dominant relations articulated by language and taken up by the idiom of the school, which is in fact the idiom of the dominant group. In other words, perceptible inequalities are attributable to the situation itself; difficulties faced by working-class children at school are related to how the school and its requirements ‘impact’ on different forms of language, means of communication and relations with language, and are underpinned by a theory of social domination sustained in part by the prevailing language of the school. Yet this explanation of inequality, which is very widespread among sociologists and concentrates on the opposition between a dominant and dominated languages, does not account for the no less significant social inequalities that become apparent in children’s performance in arithmetic from primary school onwards.

Generally speaking, it would seem likely that social inequalities in attainment, especially in the early stages of education, are more likely to be due to the dissimilar levels of ability and self-discipline that children have acquired from socialization within the family than to any ‘unequal distance’ between an arbitrary school culture – that of the dominant group – and the prevailing cultures of different social
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milieus. Without drifting into a ‘deficit-related sociology’, there is a need to build up a soundly based sociology of cognitive development, which would not be without political implications. Indeed, if socialization within the family leads to unequal levels of ability that constitute real barriers to learning, the scope for action is clearly not the same as when everything is attributable to curricula conditioned by the dictates of culture that are arbitrarily governed by an uncompromising ‘dominant group’.

Notwithstanding what has been said, the influence that the occupation of parents has on attainment is not exerted wholly through this cultural transmission and its effect on the ability of their children. For example in the United Kingdom it has been noted that parental occupation has a specific impact on the school attainment of 16-year-olds of otherwise equal ability (Sullivan, 2001). Other channels by which this influence is conveyed no doubt include the differing ambitions of families with respect to their children’s future, and the strategies they devise in order to achieve them.

The knowledge/motivation required to mobilize one’s capital

The ‘cultural inheritance’ metaphor is also misleading in that simply ‘inheriting’ is never enough. Even in privileged milieux (those of the ‘inheritors’), effort is required in order to do well; family supervision both inside and outside school is strong and almost professional, and relations with the school are the focus of deliberate action. Family strategies and relations between families and schools are now regarded as highly significant in generating distinctive forms of social inequality.

Much research indicates that, in order to be effective, the cultural capital of parents needs to be mediated by their ‘social capital’ (the social relations they are capable of mobilizing). This specific contribution of social capital to children’s school careers is especially marked among the poorest parents. What counts, in fact, is not possessions in themselves, but the ability to activate social and cultural resources in relations with the school concerned. These resources make it easier for parents, through their contacts with teachers, to
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satisfy school requirements and take part in school activities, with ultimate benefits for their children. In all industrialized countries, strong social inequalities are evident in their ability to establish contacts with teachers (middle-class parents being in the best position in this respect). Far from revealing that parental interest in their children’s education varies, these contacts have a greater tendency to reflect variable degrees of difficulty in communicating, or different conceptions of how duties should be shared between school and the family. Working-class people consider that it is not for them to interfere in the work of teachers, whereas collaboration of this kind comes naturally to the more well-to-do. Furthermore, working-class parents are afraid of being regarded as poor parents, with some justification given the often stereotyped view that teachers have of them. There is nonetheless often a correlation between the involvement of parents and their children’s attainment (in the case of Latin America, for example, see Willms and Somers, 2001), and in most countries arrangements have been made to encourage and democratize relations between families and schools for the benefit of all; yet it is to be noted that such relations are more commonplace in countries in which the school system is the responsibility of local authorities or communities (as in Denmark, the Netherlands, etc.) than in traditionally centralized countries such as France and Italy (OECD, 1997).

The way in which people manage to mobilize their own resources is essential and provides for greater insight into certain observations that are disturbing if one stands by the significance of ‘unequal distance’. This applies to the case of foreign children or those of immigrant origin who face no specific difficulties (distinct from those associated with occupational status). In point of fact, emphasizing proactive attitudes vis-à-vis school (leading often to more ambitious expectations) is more instructive, for they are fully consistent with the strategy adopted when families migrate and know they need school to further the interests of their children and ensure their integration.

All in all, where families are ready to engage with school, this is because it is useful in helping them to achieve their ends. In the industrialized countries with higher living standards and a broad awareness of why school is important, it is now very common for parents from all social backgrounds to mobilize in this area on behalf
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of their children. Furthermore, a certain uniformity is to be noted in the material conditions they offer their children to help them as best they can with their school work (purchasing books and a desk, etc.). Yet there remain differences between different social milieu in the quality of the daily environment and the extent to which it is geared towards school requirements, whether this involves encouraging an ordered lifestyle, controlling use of the television, organizing numerous educational activities and, obviously, also helping children with their school work, etc. Even though most parents wish to help their children, their ability to do so depends on the educational level of the mother, and mothers who are least educated tend to rely more on resources available from relatives or others in their neighbourhood. As for those who are most educated, they organize the daily lives of their children around educational objectives by planning for extracurricular, artistic and sports activities and co-ordinating everything, school work included, in an almost professional manner. It is therefore one thing to mobilize, but another to do so effectively with the intellectual and information resources that one has at one’s disposal.

What should be emphasized is that the aims pursued by parents go beyond the immediate educational perspective to include a concern for social reproduction. As soon as decisions regarding school are at issue, it is not surprising to observe regularly that families behave differently with a view to maintaining their positional advantage (in the social hierarchy) through their children. It should be borne in mind that this accounts for a substantial proportion – around half – of social inequalities reflected in the path followed through education. In interpreting social inequalities associated specifically with what is decided or planned in this respect, one may, of course, return to the ‘cultural inheritance’ theory. Thus it may be argued that the cultural level of parents has at least some bearing on their ability to decide between branches or types of educational provision which sometimes subtly differ, or that educated parents are understandably more confident in the potential of their children or prefer them to have the kind of education which they themselves received. This is why in Germany the cultural level of a family is foremost in explaining why children at the age of 11 enter the long classical stream (in the Gymnasium) in that the culture of certain groups is much closer to the
general tenor of its course content. Similarly, in Italy, if the educational level of parents is linked to the educational attainment of their children, this is solely because it affects the kind of provision selected on completion of compulsory schooling. On the other hand, in the case of the United Kingdom, research by Sullivan (2001) shows that while the educational level of parents and their cultural practices no longer influence the importance attached to education and qualifications (which is very considerable among all social groups), a correlation persists between these variables and pupils’ self-confidence, which is much stronger in groups which are at a cultural advantage.

Basically, it seems impossible to grasp how decisions about the most appropriate kind of education are reached without reference to the fact that selection of a particular branch or type of provision is based on anticipating the future (as is suggested by researchers such as Boudon, 1973; Goldthorpe, 1996; or Erikson and Jonsson, 1996): To secure an appropriate occupation, one has to opt for suitable types of courses and do so x years beforehand ... Those who decide, i.e. parents, implicitly or explicitly consider the risk (of failure) and the cost (cost of studies, loss of earnings) and anticipate future developments; accordingly, they draw up strategies after considering cost-benefit trade-offs with due regard for the differing implications of the various options. Social inequalities thus derive from the aggregate impact of decisions made by players endowed with unequal resources, who belong to a social environment which is the benchmark used to weigh up the advantages, costs and risks associated with a particular type of school education. From this standpoint, the main factor underlying inequality, therefore, is that scope for decision-making by the players involved appears to differ depending on their social position.

A certain number of findings lend weight to this view of the decision-making player (though occasionally qualifying it). For example, most relevant research points to the occurrence of socially differentiated self-selection at the successive points or stages at which decisions have to be taken one way or the other about which specific kind of education will be pursued: While the preferences of young people who do well at school are almost identical irrespective of their social background, divergences start to become apparent when attainment
is no more than average, with those from working-class backgrounds definitely scaling down their ambitions. Clearly, if pupils were to choose their courses in accordance with fundamentally different values depending on their social environment, one would expect to witness divergences between groups regardless of attainment levels, given that working-class children actually tend to be less ambitious. In fact, the patterns of self-selection observed, which vary both with school attainment levels and social background, derive rather, on the whole, from the effect of parameters whose value is not the same for all social milieus, and one of which is the objective degree of risk (wherever inequalities in attainment subsist); in the same way they may derive from responsiveness to the risk and costs incurred by the studies envisaged. This risk is greater in precarious situations (mediocre or weak pupils) with an additional cost (that incurred by time or a decision to opt for other types of course), which is a more critical consideration for some young people and their families than for others.

Clearly, the anticipation of future events in this way is inseparable from the social ambitions entertained. Families from comfortable backgrounds are keen at least to recreate for their children the social positions occupied by their parents; confronted by costs of little consequence, this concern is such that they urge their children to embark on long selective studies, even when, on the evidence of their school performance, this is a risky undertaking. Conversely, working-class families can offer their children upward social mobility with less demanding qualifications and levels of social integration and, because they are more aware of the risks at stake, will encourage their children to continue their studies only if they appear likely to do well. Rather than explaining this once more in terms of fundamental differences in ambition between social groups, differences in the kind of education chosen may be interpreted as rational positioning strategies in the wide variety of social contexts that exist.

**Controlling the institution to reproduce one’s position**

Inequalities in school-related strategies are thus fairly directly attributable to the dissimilar goals they map out very logically for the children concerned. In a society characterized by inequality, some
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positions are more desirable than others. In the PISA survey, the percentage of young people in OECD countries who wanted to become manual workers or unskilled employees was close to nought, whereas 40 per cent said they had their sights set on intellectual or scientific professions. All families will therefore seek to secure for their children the most coveted social positions. All mobilize to this end, striving to ensure that their children will occupy a position at least equivalent to their own and, therefore, one reasonably well placed on the social scale: Even if inequalities vis-à-vis costs and risk (an important element in inequality among families) had no bearing on decisions about children’s education, the differing implications of various schooling careers, which stem from the perception players have of society, would give rise to inequalities in educational ambitions (unless differences in the social positions to be attained were so slight as to render any social competition virtually meaningless).

As a whole, social inequalities find their way into school, therefore, because the qualifications it offers are of crucial significance. It is thus to be expected that, in addition to their daily efforts on behalf of their children, families do all they can to exercise some influence over schools. Education historians have revealed that, over the long term, the education system in Europe at least has been devised to produce and recreate the hierarchy between manual and non-manual culture, devaluing the spoken word in favour of what is written, technical expertise in favour of theory. It is also noteworthy that, in these dual systems, secondary education has been conceived in an aristocratic spirit as a detached form of provision with few implications for employment, and one which, like other practices, has been part of a ‘class culture’ for children of the bourgeoisie, consigning the children of ordinary folk to primary school for preparation for life. This outlook, which permeates and becomes firmly rooted in many aspects of the system, subsequently tends to become an enduring trend. In industrialized countries even today, vocational types of provision are devalued in favour of more ‘intellectual’ course offerings, the latter being offered in a way that blocks access to the most prestigious streams of education.
It is common that educational policies that determine the overriding objectives, the scale and structure of financing, the material conditions underlying educational provision, curricular content, and patterns of provision are articulated by certain groups or lobbies and thus reflect social relationships and parental strategies. Clearly this dimension comes to the fore more readily in education systems in which users are influential (in most cases at school level). One might therefore expect to find that parental lobbies wield more influence in decentralized systems; yet even in centralized countries in which decisions about education are taken from above, parents acting through their associations (which graduate parents are especially inclined to join) or as a result of their political commitments are no less capable—though not to the same extent—of promoting the interests of their children via national level authorities. It should be added that parents do not exert influence solely in the daily activity of schools. History has demonstrated how the most educated parents manage to fight certain reforms, especially those which attempt to make school curricula more uniform, contrary to their own pursuit of distinct forms of provision (Kerckhoff, Fogelman and Manlove, 1997, in the case of the United Kingdom, for example).

All in all, as we shall discuss further, a significant amount of social inequality derives from the fact that different families are unable to secure the same hearing for their strategies to ensure that their children make the most of school. They are clearly persuaded that providing their children with a sound education is a top priority; indeed, there are few signs that they shirk their responsibilities or abandon their efforts in this respect, but rather that they are not similarly equipped to meet the challenge in terms of what school itself requires.

The present chapter has been concerned to discuss factors underlying social inequalities relatively external to school; prevailing social inequalities in society permeate school in the sense that they govern the principles underlying the behaviour of parents and pupils alike. Indeed, in societies in which action originates in different contexts and is geared towards differing expectations, it is hard to see how either the ability to succeed or strategies vis-à-vis school could fail to be affected by people’s social origins. Yet while inequalities in the
context of school in industrialized societies appear to be a universal phenomenon, their scale varies, as we have seen, depending on the country concerned. This suggests that the ways in which schools are actually organized and function on a daily basis may exert a significant influence over the progress of children during their education, as well as the social inequalities that affect it.
IV. The school origins of social inequality

The impact of social factors with their roots in the family cannot be disassociated from what is offered and provided at school. Sound academic performance and progress belong to a context (that of the school or class) which cannot be disregarded as far as the scale of the social inequalities it generates is concerned. Research clearly demonstrates that the quality of this context may vary and that it has a bearing on the progress of pupils – in particular the weakest – and thus also on the scale of the inequalities at issue.

In a way that is less documented, research also indicates fairly regularly that the distribution of effective contexts is not a matter of chance: working-class pupils de facto find their way into the least effective contexts. Assuming that the context does have an influence, and following a brief summary of the ways in which it is exerted, this chapter will attempt to provide an insight into the processes that bind inequalities attributable to the context to social inequalities. Different factors are at work here. First among them are material inequalities, bearing in mind nonetheless that, in industrial countries, factors of an educational and psycho-social nature appear to be the most important. Also of relevance is the whole pattern of activity that develops in the classroom, which is often unfavourable to the weakest pupils: On the one hand, teachers adjust to their pupils, with undesirable effects, while the most well-informed parents seek out and appropriate the most effective contexts, using the aggregate influence of the latter to reinforce their impact.

Schools of unequal effectiveness

It has been accepted now for some 30 years that the specific context of school education (a particular school or class) has a definite influence on the learning and attitudes of pupils which extends beyond the admittedly major influence of their social characteristics or initial ability at school (see, for example, Scheerens, 2000). This contextual
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Influence is always more marked among mediocre or mediocre/weak pupils; it is also more liable to affect learning activity that is directly school related (in mathematics and science) than what is steadily acquired also in the course of daily life (particularly the mother tongue).

As regards the performance of pupils aged 15 in all OECD countries (2001), 36 per cent of the variation in scores for reading literacy is attributable to disparities between schools. This figure varies very significantly depending on the country concerned; from around 75 per cent in Belgium or Germany, to under 10 per cent in Iceland or Sweden. The full extent of ‘school effects’ will obviously be more conspicuous wherever schools differ widely from one to the next. In the least economically developed countries, Heyneman and Loxley (1983) showed that school-related factors had a greater impact in terms of children’s attainment than family considerations, in contrast to the situation in the richest countries, in which a minimum level of quality is guaranteed in all contexts (for example class sizes and the quality of school buildings are more uniform in rich countries than in poor ones).

However, the proportion of variance in the scores which is attributable to the school attended is not a direct measurement of differences in effectiveness between schools: It may conceal the fact that, depending on the country concerned, schools have structures, policies and an intake that are to some extent dissimilar, so that the degree of segregation between them varies accordingly. To single out any possible ‘school effects’, we have to examine the progression of pupils who, while similar at the outset, have been educated in different schools. In any given year, such ‘school effects’ are moderate: according to the research carried out, between 8 per cent and 15 per cent of the variance in pupil scores is attributable to differences between schools, so that ‘school effects’ appear to account slightly more for the variance than does the social background of pupils in the same year. These figures should, however, be regarded as broad estimates, since the scale of ‘school effects’ (or ‘classroom effects’) depends on the statistical method adopted.
In countries, such as France, in which these ‘school effects’ are limited, however weak they might first appear they are nonetheless such that when pupils educated in the most effective establishment leave their collège (lower secondary school), they obtain a score in mathematics that is over a standard variation higher than that recorded by pupils whose level was comparable when they entered the collège (i.e. four years earlier) but who were unlucky enough to attend the least effective school (Grisay, 1997). It should be noted that ‘school effects’ are in general more marked in mathematics than in the mother tongue. It is also of interest that they often manifest themselves in the sociability and civic attitudes of pupils, as well as in their general well-being.

The research provides a fairly clear idea of what an effective collège or primary school is like. However, it is harder to draw firm conclusions about why one school is more effective than another as most of the research is concerned with correlations. All that is known is that a particular characteristic is statistically associated with a positive ‘school effect’. Thanks to the ‘school effectiveness’ movement, it is thus apparent (Scheerens, 2000) which educational factors peculiar to the school tend to result in a high level of effectiveness with, in particular, firm control by the school head, a firm focus on acquiring fundamental proficiency, a sense of security and order, and frequent assessment of pupils’ progress. No less significant are high expectations on the part of teachers, and thus the premium placed on schoolwork – expectations which are shared with parents and pupils. Yet further positive factors are the quality of teacher/pupil relations and of life in the collège (as perceived by pupils and teachers alike), clear regulations, the existence of pupil rights and responsibilities, and a peaceful atmosphere. The recent PISA survey confirms these findings and notes correlations between pupil performance and certain school practices, such as a firm commitment on the part of teachers and a good atmosphere.

But the very concept of school atmosphere, despite its sociological plausibility, remains a precarious one. It presupposes within schools the presence of a specific frame of mind, a set of standards, values and attitudes shared by all staff. Yet the variance of educational attitudes and notions among teachers in a given school in some countries, such
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as France (Grisay, 1997; Bressoux, 1994), proves to be as great as the national level variance among them, and primary schools encapsulate an exceptionally wide variety of educational expectations, outlooks and practices, so much so that there are greater differences within individual schools than from one school to the next. The next step, therefore, is to determine the true significance of what happens in school and in the classroom (or group) respectively: While it is clear that events in the classroom, in which the value and experience of school are fostered, depend partly on what happens in school itself, the extent to which this is so is critical, as is also, therefore, the degree of class autonomy.

The unequally stimulating dynamics of classroom teaching

At primary level, ‘classroom effects’ appear to account for around 10-15 per cent of annual progress in pupil attainment, and once more their impact is greater in mathematics than in the mother tongue. Among the characteristics of a class, the aggregate characteristics of different pupils who are taught in it are an all-important factor. Depending on the country concerned, the deliberate aim of the way pupils are grouped together in classes may be to mix those who are strong and those who are weak or, on the contrary, to form classes that are as homogeneous as possible. To this end, the system may enable the weakest pupils to do their year again, stream pupils in accordance with their ability, or establish classes on the basis of their initial level – practices which are reasonably consistent (Demeuse, Crahay and Monseur, 2001). Relatively few countries in Europe thus seek to encourage homogeneity (Germany, Belgium, etc.). The average level of their pupils (as recorded among 15-year-olds by PISA) tends to be mediocre, if not rather poor, inequalities are somewhat more marked, and the school or class attended accounts more for their performance, which is logical since the school (or class) creates environments that are of unequal quality. Furthermore, in some countries such as France, grouping pupils by level is officially forbidden but still occurs in practice. Inequalities among pupils are affected by the way they are grouped together, which influences their individual progress to a varied extent. Thus the weakest pupils benefit from their inclusion in a mixed-ability class, whereas the
strongest, on the contrary, lose out. But what the former gain is far greater (around twice as great) than what the latter sacrifice.

Several now well-known processes (thanks in particular to very extensive English language research such as that of Gamoran and Mare, 1989) account for this differentiating effect of ability streaming. First, depending on the academic level of the class concerned, both the quantity and quality of the instruction provided differ, because teachers vary their approach in accordance with what they suppose to be the level of their pupils. They offer the best pupils as much opportunity as possible for further improvement by interacting with and stimulating them as often as possible, as well as assessing them positively, whereas the contrary applies to weak groups. In some cases, they even vary their aims: besides proceeding at a slower pace with the weakest groups, teachers can concentrate on more modest objectives. The effect of ability streaming on what pupils learn may thus be explained by the fact that classes thus formed lead teachers to vary the quantity, pace or quality of their activity accordingly.

Processes of a psycho-social nature are also at work here. Equal ability groups amount to social contexts in which pupils assess their own performance, internalize school norms and learn to nurture certain ambitions regarding their future performance. Streaming contributes to the process of self-definition and the establishment of social identity, as well as the creation of group norms. For example in weak groups one may note a gradual decline in the level of concentration of the pupils, or an increased pressure on teachers to lower their requirements.

Educators (parents and teachers) also develop differing perceptions and expectations vis-à-vis different groups (independently of the actual ability of pupils who belong to them). Pupils are thus addressed and stimulated on the basis of their supposed level (the reference here is to labelling theories). And the specific role of teacher expectations in educational dynamics is well established: A positive expectation stimulates pupils, whereas the anticipation of failure may well result in just that.

All in all, equal-ability classes, as environments for learning and socialization that are labelled from the outset, function largely along
the lines of the self-fulfilling prophecy. The academic level of achievement of pupils, far from being a pure reflection of their ability, is thus also the outcome of the combined effect of their own expectations and the judgements of others who credit them with a particular potential and, to a varying extent, spur them on to achieve it. It would nonetheless appear that changes in teaching brought about by streaming (in which content is neither studied to the same depth, nor is the work rate consistent from one class to the next, etc.) on the whole exercise a greater impact than psychosocial types of mechanism (different degrees of socialization, group norms, expectations, etc.), which leads to the conclusion that ‘instruction-related’ factors are more determinant than the effects of labelling.

The crucially important ingredient in this respect is the educational approach of those who actually teach: research reveals that differences in their effectiveness, which underlie ‘classroom effects’, are primarily attributable not to their personal characteristics – their sex, age and training, though not length of service and experience, up to an optimal point reached after around 15 years – but to what they actually do day by day. It is through their daily work that some teachers manage to get more out of pupils than others, bearing in mind that it is only possible to measure the influence of practices that vary from one teacher to the next, and also that weak pupils are always more affected by them. The poorer the quality of the teaching practices, the greater will be the differences between individual pupils (with quality defined *ex post* by the positive effect that those practices have on pupil development).

Alongside the impact of teacher expectations, a crucial parameter is the management of class time, which varies significantly from one teacher to the next in a way that confirms their relative freedom of approach, even where national regulations exist (for examples relating to a variety of countries, see Crahay, 2000). The effective teacher (from the standpoint of what is learnt at school) is the one who manages to maximize the time during which pupils are active in terms of learning (bearing in mind that there is an optimum learning time). The American educationist Carroll (1963) postulated that the ability of pupils did not set an upper limit on the level of learning and skills they could achieve, but that it determined the time they would need to reach a particular
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level. It was thus possible that one might bring all pupils to the same
level by varying the time invested in this in accordance with their
individual needs. The way in which teachers manage and diversify
time is therefore probably crucially decisive; not just in terms of average
effectiveness, but equity too.

Over and above these two solid findings (the importance of time
management and expectations), research suggests that what might be
regarded as the technical effects of particular teaching practices are
not very significant. In fact, such practices form a whole, so that
effectiveness depends on an overall pattern: First, no one practice
yields spectacular results in itself; secondly, as in the case of ‘school
effects’ and irrespective of the context in which teaching occurs, there
is hardly any one approach whose effectiveness might be termed
identical to that of another. Admittedly, all research emphasizes the
importance of the time pupils spend working actively, the constant
precise monitoring of learning, and the expectations of teachers.
Similarly, where the time allocated is too short, there is every chance
that inequalities will become greater. Yet, while there is no practice
effective in one context that would be totally ineffective in another,
the impact of most of the relations identified is also a function of the
types of pupils concerned. For example, in the case of those from
privileged backgrounds, the most effective teachers are very demanding.
They ensure that the former are constantly spurred on, and criticize
them readily, whereas with pupils from poor backgrounds (who
generally have a more negative view of themselves), it is more effective
to encourage and attempt to motivate them, while minimizing criticism,
etc. The evaluation of a particular teaching practice cannot, therefore,
be limited to comparing average levels, as it must also take into account
the dispersion of results and their correlation with initial levels, as well
as possible interaction between the effects of one practice and the
personal characteristics of pupils if one is to understand how inequality
comes about.
A context strengthening the position of the most privileged

It might be thought that all these contextual factors, which at school, group or class level are conducive to a greater or lesser degree of effectiveness, depend primarily on the readiness of educators in any one place to intervene and will be spread at random, without having any guaranteed impact on social inequalities in attainment. Yet it is regularly acknowledged that, on average, achieving schools more often cater for pupils from well-to-do backgrounds. It has been known since the time of the Coleman report (1966) that all pupils, and especially the weakest, benefit from attending a school with a generally privileged intake. This type of finding is characteristic of the OECD countries (OECD, 2001): the performance of pupils aged 15 is better in schools attended by those from the middle or upper middle classes, and this influence exerted by the composition of the school intake is stronger than the specific influence of the social background of each individual pupil (remembering that PISA records only isolated scores and does not measure how pupils progress over time).

However, it is apparent that the plentiful literature on school effectiveness has astonishingly little to say about this. It has focused on the influence of characteristics identified solely at school level (and especially material aspects, such as the size or resources of schools, but also on variables of a psychosocial nature like their ambience) for the purpose of demonstrating that the act of teaching depends on the immediate context in which it occurs within a particular class and school. Now it is certainly legitimate for a field of research to circumscribe its scope and limit its investigations, particularly if partly driven by the desire to demonstrate that school processes exert an influence of their own and that school may thus be improved. However, overlooking the fact that schools themselves are anchored in a broader social environment (a neighbourhood or community, etc.) is more questionable. Some of the foregoing research refers to the school context, which is mainly understood to mean the type of school intake. However, until recently this was regarded as no more than a framework with little bearing on the search for factors contributing to effectiveness that were encountered in the great majority of cases and irrespective of the context concerned.
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From the 1980s onwards, the question clearly arose whether it was not appropriate to ‘contextualize’ factors underlying effectiveness: Were all these factors pertinent irrespective of the school context and, particularly, the social make-up of the school intake, commonly known as the ‘school mix’? Otherwise put, were such factors at work in their own right, irrespective of the school mix (implying that there was scope for improvement via just ‘one best way’) or (if not) to what extent did they derive their effect solely from their association with a particular school mix? In this latter case, it was appropriate that all factors governing effectiveness should be specified in conjunction with their context. From a political angle, the consequences of certain actions or educational processes might be overestimated if one failed to take account of the school population concerned which had a definite bearing on their effectiveness.

Gaining a better insight into this issue, whose political implications are very real, calls for detailed investigation into why schools in which the majority of pupils are from working-class families tend to be less effective and, conversely, why those whose pupils are from well-to-do backgrounds are more so.

One first reason might be that these schools do not all have the same staff and material resources. The quality of their material environment, teaching resources, etc. may differ in different neighbourhoods, communes, and (rural or suburban) areas in accordance with the school mix. In fact, few data are available on this matter as, in countries in which the State is supposed to offer all pupils the same educational provision, the question of whether the quality of that provision is uniform is relatively taboo. The OECD data (2001) indicate that certain parameters, such as the pupil/teacher ratio or the level of resources possessed by a school, are not related to the socio-economic profile of its pupils, whereas others, such as the level of training of its teachers, are more closely related in this way (especially in countries in which the social segregation of schools corresponds to the organization of branches or streams of provision). In the countries of Latin America (Willms and Somers, 2001), there is a positive correlation between all school resources (except the teacher/pupil ratio) and a school’s socio-economic profile. Conversely, at school level, some countries practise positive discrimination, for
example giving more funding to higher level schools that enrol a high percentage of working-class pupils or pupils from ethnic minorities (Karsten, 1994), as occurs in the Netherlands. Yet it is by no means certain that, in the already relatively rich industrialized countries, factors of the ‘material resources’ type have a significant impact on school effectiveness, and researchers such as Hanushek (1997) and Scheerens (2000) are divided in their opinion on this matter. But, regardless of whether more resources result in greater effectiveness or not, it is hard to prevent the most experienced and highly qualified teachers from seeking out (and securing) appointments in schools with pupils that are easier to teach. These phenomena of differentiation between schools might themselves be accentuated in accordance with certain ways in which systems function. Accordingly, one might postulate that inequalities between schools would be more marked in countries in which they enjoy considerable autonomy. In fact, in the OECD data, no clear positive correlation is observed between decentralization and the scale of inequality between schools. For example, school autonomy is considerable in countries such as Finland, in which segregation between schools is weak (and also naturally dependent on the social segregation of the environment), but is also considerable in some English-speaking countries, such as New Zealand or the United Kingdom, in which inequalities are more conspicuous.

A second line of investigation in seeking to understand the mediocre effectiveness of schools with a working-class intake involves examination of more directly educational processes, which vary depending on the social identity of the pupils concerned. In many countries, it is now known that most operational features associated with greater effectiveness are less in evidence in lower-secondary schools enrolling working-class pupils (OECD, 2001; Willms and Somers, 2001 for the case of Latin America): The quality of life in these schools is less congenial, with less tendency to ensure discipline, while time is not used as productively and the atmosphere is less disciplined (with additional time lost handling problems of a disciplinary nature). Exposure to learning and concentration on academic content are not as intense, curricula are covered less comprehensively, and regulations are not as clearly stated. Finally, the general climate is
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unquestionably less conducive to learning: Indiscipline is more widespread, as are the various forms of school misbehaviour (pupils arriving late, playing truant, chattering in class, etc.). Relations with teachers are described as lacking warmth and confidence, and the morale of teachers is relatively low.

Alongside this influence on the scale and quality of interpersonal relations and, in broader terms, educational provision in general, a working-class pupil intake may have an effect also on the organization, management and general climate of the school. It may be more or less straightforward to organize its daily life, comply with the routines that make work possible, and prevent too much time being lost in managing discipline and the procedures for administering it, etc. All this may make for a climate that is more or less geared towards work and greater or lesser appreciation of what pupils have learnt, both of which are themselves conducive to effectiveness. Finally, curricular provision itself (study options and specific measures), not to mention extra-curricular activity for pupils, is liable to vary depending on the school population.

All in all, what tends to distinguish disadvantaged and privileged lower secondary schools are differences relating to the foregoing educational factors (discipline, exposure to learning, time lost in class, school management, etc.) rather than to the personal characteristics of pupils, such as the importance they attach to their school work, the time spent on homework, absenteeism, or parental supervision. Schools are therefore, so to speak, more dissimilar than the pupils they cater for. There is thus definite inequality in the school resources offered to pupils, which governs the way they are educated from day to day and tends to accentuate social inequalities originating in the family.

The (often perverse) effects of school mix and the way teachers adjust to pupils

Now, while pupils submit to the context, such as it is, the context is also fashioned by their own collective presence since, in interacting with teachers, their social characteristics and ability at school will assist in creating an environment of unequal quality. The context
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consists of the classmates encountered, the resource they represent, the atmosphere this generates in the school and classroom, and the teaching practices that it will be possible – or, on the contrary, more difficult – to develop as a result. From research into the effect of the school mix, one may understand how schools with pupils from a variety of social backgrounds or privileged backgrounds constitute de facto better quality environments than schools attended by working-class children. The extent to which pupils are stimulated by their daily interaction with each other (their reciprocal peer effects) varies in accordance with the resource differentials (educational level, family environment, etc.) between them. Accordingly, pupils from working-class backgrounds educated in schools with a mixed intake learn from their contact with peers who have greater cultural resources or more diversified life experiences; this daily proximity may also dissuade them from developing deviant school behaviour or withdrawal behaviour. Contact with pupils who are more adjusted to school norms (especially if those pupils are in the majority) appears likely to prevent the development of ‘anti-school’ norms among pupils who are culturally more remote from school (Thrupp, 1999). Over and above its effects on academic attainment, this situation of significant social mix would also seem to exert an influence on the educational aspirations of young working-class people, which are stimulated as a result of their daily contact with pupils who have ambitious goals (as Coleman emphasized as far back as the 1960s).

The attitudes and behaviour of pupils, some of which originate specifically in the daily context of the classroom, are thus one of the means by which the social mix of the school population exerts an influence with, in this case, a positive effect on the attainment of working-class pupils. But the practices of teachers may also be open to question. Clearly, if weak pupils are more readily affected by ‘teacher effects’ and the impact of teaching practices, inequalities between pupils and, by the same token, social inequalities will become greater the more those practices are ineffective. In the event, effectiveness and equity go hand in hand and, as regards the two basic parameters of effectiveness that time management and expectations represent, it appears that the teaching practices most commonly adopted in the presence of working-class pupils are usually less beneficial.
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As far as time management first is concerned, study of the practices used by those who teach pupils at a disadvantage reveals how much of the time allocated to teaching activities is taken up by tasks intended to keep order in the classroom. Yet the time allocated is a key determinant of learning, just as too limited an amount of time penalizes specifically the weakest pupils. Other findings are that teachers of disadvantaged pupils in secondary education focus on more down-to-earth, tangible content derived from real-life experiences, whereas pupils from well-to-do backgrounds are offered more detached, abstract concepts. As early as nursery school in Belgium, the main aim in classes with a majority of pupils from poor backgrounds is to prepare them for primary school, whereas classes with pupils from well-to-do backgrounds will include activities intended to develop the personality (Crahay, 2000). Adjusting activities in this way sometimes also involves changes in the educational aims pursued: In the poorest areas, greater priority will be attached to motivating pupils or fostering a compliant attitude towards school content than to their learning accomplishments as such (van Zanten, 2001). It is also recognized that in privileged schools in which the culture and canons of behaviour familiar to pupils appear closer to institutional expectations, teachers may require more from them, cover courses more thoroughly and engage with them more regarding the content of lessons, etc. (Opdenakker and van Damme, 2001; Thrupp, 1999, for example).

Practice and expectations clearly go hand in hand and, as far as teacher expectations are concerned, they tend to nurture inequalities present at the outset. Differing expectations emerge when pupils have to specialize or decide what further type of education they will pursue, and teachers tend to offer greater support to the more ambitious preferences of young people even of only moderate attainment from well-to-do backgrounds, whereas caution is the order of the day vis-à-vis those from more working-class backgrounds. On the other hand, research does not suggest any discrimination on the part of teachers in daily classroom activity, meaning that they do not react differently to pupils from different social backgrounds whose behaviour is exactly the same. Yet teachers base their expectations on criteria such as sex or social or ethnic identity, as perceived through physical appearance, the way pupils dress or speak or, yet again and increasingly so at each successive stage of the curriculum on indicators of educational ranking.
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(previous assessment results, to which group were they streamed). Expectations are based on mental representations – which, like all such representations, are naturally stereotyped – of the ideal pupil, or pupils destined to succeed or fail and, therefore, on an implicit broad explanatory theory of school failure, to which popularized sociological research doubtless gives some credence. As a result, teachers tend to underestimate the ability of working-class children. They expect them to fail more regularly and put any such failure down to factors linked to the family and cultural environment, whereas the failure of pupils from well-to-do backgrounds tends to be attributed to psychological causes. This has a bearing on pupil assessment marks, which are often harsher for young working-class pupils whose actual performance is identical to non-working class pupils.

There is nothing unusual in these findings, which serve as a reminder that social judgements rooted in a hierarchical society are articulated and shaped at school. However, besides attributing failure to causes independent of school for which teachers cannot be held responsible, these mental perceptions, and the expectations that derive from them, help to perpetuate the regular statistical profiles on which they are based in the manner of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Furthermore, certain teaching practices may actually magnify these very inequalities. Accordingly, sociologists explain how it is important for educators to be explicit about their expectations and criteria, so that they are clear even to pupils whose original backgrounds are far removed from the school. In countries in which secondary education has broadly opened up and enrolled people from many different backgrounds in recent years, as in France, it is often apparent that those most culturally distant from school, in particular, have considerable difficulty in fathoming its expectations; social inequalities are thus fuelled by ‘socio-cognitive misunderstandings’. And it is a point of fact that organizing activities to assist pupils at school or with their homework would be especially effective in schools whose pupils are from poor social backgrounds (Grisay, 1997).

All in all and as a result of a variety of processes, it may thus be concluded that greater numbers of pupils from well-to-do backgrounds in general benefit from better teaching conditions. There is broad
agreement that, in OECD countries, education systems function in such a way that, on average, they tend to strengthen the advantage held by pupils from privileged backgrounds. The impact of the social environment on children’s school performance and career is thus to a considerable extent indirect and mediated through access to a school context that is not the same in all cases. Dissociating the benefits that pupils gain from their social environment from those they secure from the context in which they are educated sometimes proves difficult. Conversely, many school-related factors apparently conducive to better progress (a calm atmosphere, efficient use of time, etc.) owe their effectiveness at least partly to the fact that, in the event, they are more frequently the preserve of privileged pupils. The family and school do not thus appear to be two independent institutions, as the school context is itself shaped by the strategy of the players, teachers and families, in accordance with dynamics that tend endlessly to exacerbate inequalities.

The composition of groups of pupils and the way in which teachers adapt to them in classes and schools are thus very important phenomena in understanding the relation between contextual influences and social inequalities. Context has the effect of consolidating these inequalities because the most privileged pupils always benefit from the most propitious contexts and, indeed, help to make them more effective still through their combined impact and the fact that teachers respond by adapting to them. Much research (for example the work of Thrupp, 1999 and van Zanten, 2001) reveals that the real curriculum is the outcome of a process of negotiation between pupils as they are who oblige teachers to adapt to them, and what those pupils are offered, so that in the final analysis the situation will remain bearable. This concern on the part of teachers that they should adjust to pupils is understandable and even necessary, but it may have perverse consequences. When they strive to offer pupils content adapted to their wide range of different abilities and cultural interests, they sometimes increase the foregoing initial inequalities.

The prevailing context and practices, therefore, have their own consequences for the weakest pupils in particular, in a way that tends to be self-perpetuating. In that respect, such practices relate to issues of fairness. But strategies of families themselves are also instrumental
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in substantially intensifying this impact of contextual variety on social
inequality; the most well informed families are fully aware of the
inequality inherent in school contexts and respond rationally to defend
their own interests, thereby strengthening it still further.

Differing family strategies in choosing the school
context for their children

Families are not oblivious to inequalities in the opportunities for
learning or general quality of the educational environment that schools
offer their children. If lower secondary schools, in which the majority
of pupils are from well-to-do backgrounds, are more effective and
have a more settled atmosphere and better teacher/pupil relations – in
short, display greater well-being – it is rational for families to seek out
this type of institution, but without the same chances of success. In all
countries, various surveys of the reasons given by families for choosing
a particular school show that, while they all refer openly to the quality
of its academic performance, strictly educational considerations are
by no means the only ones cited; it is also very important for parents
that they should take account of what they perceive to be the
atmosphere of the school, the quality of its teachers and the well-
being of their child. That said, and in the absence of any objective
data on these matters, the quality of a school as perceived by families
is often inferred from the apparent quality of its pupils and thus their
social, or sometimes ethnic, characteristics. Parents thus choose
appropriate classmates for their children, just as they choose a school
that is tolerably effective. Upstream, in a system with school mapping
or zoning, in which schools recruit their pupils essentially on a
geographical basis, some families can position themselves close to
their preferred schools from the outset when they choose where to
live. School mapping thus confirms these inequalities linked to the
place of residence, which themselves partly derive from anticipating
its provisions.

The result of making options available, therefore, is usually an
increasingly close pairing between the most sought after schools and
well-to-do families who tend to cluster near them. Whenever scope
for choice has been offered, it is exploited primarily by families from
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comfortable backgrounds for the special purpose of ensuring that their children will be well educated (and socialized) with children similar to their own in a school whose population is not too socially or ethnically heterogeneous. This is what occurs, for example, in countries in which it has long been possible to choose the preferred school (such as the Netherlands; see Karsten, 1994), as well as in countries in which this kind of option has been introduced or extended more recently (the United Kingdom, for example; see Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995). Scope for choice thus tends to intensify the social segregation of schools, which is itself encouraged by the social segregation of the residential environment (except where choice is strictly circumscribed, as we shall see in Chapter V). For the same reasons, one might expect social inequalities to be more marked in countries in which private education is widespread. International data do not confirm the existence of such a relation, since the share of private financing (for all levels) is relatively high both in countries that are socially inegalitarian (Germany, Australia) and in others that are far less so (Republic of Korea). Conversely, the share of private funding remains modest in Switzerland (inegalitarian) and Finland (far more egalitarian).

Over and above the choice of a school, family strategies also become apparent actually within schools. Where the most well-informed families lack the means to choose a school other than the one in their neighbourhood, they develop strategies for creating a context reserved for their children: This is designed to enable them to choose study options, obtain direct access to school heads so that their children can be allocated to a specific class, or to arrange for their own selective grouping of pupils so that those whom they wish to protect are separate from the remainder (van Zanten, 2001). It is thus in the interest of families (at least those whose children are proficient and who prove to be the most influential in school circles) for their children to be in a good class (since the higher the level of the class, the better they progress) and for the school to apply streaming according to achievement level. These parental strategies are fully consistent with the private interests of well-informed parents of good pupils, and are highly rational class strategies. Yet they are inconsistent with what appears to be the general interest. This is because, from an overall standpoint, when the achievements of an entire age-group are
examined, the most effective approach involves creating heterogeneous classes, which will maximize the progress made by the weakest without hindering that of the strongest proportionally to the same extent. But the parents of the weakest pupils, who would have everything to gain from heterogeneous classes, are far less influential (and also not as well informed). School thus reflects a divergence of interests: Families fight, but with unequal weapons, to appropriate the best school resources so that they can place their children as advantageously as possible vis-à-vis those who will compete with them for access to the most privileged positions in society.

In the final analysis, it is understandable that parents who generally aim to control their living conditions (including space requirements) should seek also to offer their children the most pleasant and productive school environment possible, since the implications of educating them successfully are enormous. Families are therefore actively (but unequally) involved in creating and safeguarding 'contextual conditions' which are most beneficial to them. Action taken by the most well-to-do families is all the more effective due to the fact that the social mix of a school has a decisive impact on the socialization and education that occur there. The geographical environment in which pupils live, the school they are able to attend, the fellow pupils whose company they share as a result and – in cases in which geographical location is not ideal in this respect – some control over these different parameters are doubtless just as important aspects of social inequality and its reproduction as the 'cultural inheritance'.

Confronted by such 'spatial' forms of inequality and the foregoing strategies seeking to control them, does deliberate action by schools and teachers have any substance, or do contexts characteristic of school appear to be largely conditioned by pupil intake and the pressure exerted by users? The very existence of significant 'school effects', even where moderate, lends weight to the first of these two suppositions, namely that schools have some scope for initiative. In particular, through forming classes or selecting pupils, schools are themselves party to the creation of segregated school environments, which bolster social segregation – itself the outcome of spatial segregation. In so doing, they create conditions for access to learning and daily school life that are not the same in all cases. Conversely,
certain school contexts have the effect of evening out pupil learning achievements by influencing teaching practices or relations with families.

However, in some countries schools offer an environment that is too fragile to resist the impact of social dynamics and the interests they articulate. They struggle especially hard to devise new forms of local control when, among their teachers, there are few signs of any strong professional identity rooted in firm commitment to shared objectives. As such, they are bodies in which power is largely decentralized with almost no hierarchical structure and in which professional people carry out complex work, but do so in isolation so that it is hard to standardize procedures and evaluate results. Under such circumstances, in which teachers do not necessarily share the same objectives, they enjoy considerable leeway and may in fact function like members of an independent profession. Furthermore, besides its obligation to defend its own sectional interests (which naturally lead it towards the most convenient working conditions and thus the least difficult pupils), the teaching profession, in its outlook and practices, reflects a middle-class social identity, which objectively distances it from children from poor backgrounds. The system of school education forms a social environment with its own distinctive features and ethos, in which concern for effectiveness and fairness do not necessarily get the better of a more basic concern for self-perpetuation.

Therefore, the ‘school effect’ is not, in most cases at least, the outcome of pondered, deliberate and carefully planned action on the part of staff, but derives instead from their differing capacity to manage the pressures and resources associated with their pupils or, conversely, from their relative helplessness or hesitancy. And schools will always yield to the grip of family and pupil strategies (and the inequalities that go with them) the weaker their organization. Yet while there may be incentives for them to react in this way, school policies are a realistic proposition, and even though when considered individually the various aspects of the ‘school effect’ (or teacher effects) have a limited impact, their combined influence may result in significant differences in terms of effectiveness or equity. Finally, there is enough scope for policies originating at central level to determine the general pattern of
educational provision, ensure that it is reasonably uniform and govern relations between schools and their users. The following chapter discusses the main ways in which this may occur.
V. The impact of organizational factors, and feasible policies

Most countries have introduced policies which, over and above their general concern for enhancing effectiveness, seek to reduce social inequalities associated with school. These policies are not always rigorously evaluated. It should be remembered that policies are not appraised immediately: it is necessary first to be able to identify, implement and measure their expected average impact on the entire school population targeted, as well as on particular sub-groups, in a way that may be diversified. Yet unforeseeable and undesirable effects which are often inseparable from policy and, in a word, perverse, also have to be taken into account. Furthermore, it would be inappropriate to over-hastily ascribe whatever changes were observed to a particular policy: Certain trends in education, such as the diminishing disadvantage experienced by girls (which in many countries has turned in their favour), have not, in most cases, corresponded to explicit policies. International comparisons provide clues regarding all such matters and may lead to greater insight into the foreseeable effect of particular actions. Yet in this area also there is a need to proceed with caution, as a policy whose effects are viewed as positive in one context may prove to be far less constructive in another, given that no policy can be evaluated in isolation from its possible interaction with others.

Realistic policies in principle have to differ: They relate to factors that may be manipulated to a varying extent, and will not be as politically and socially appropriate in some countries as in others. They may originate at different levels of intervention.

The implications for social equality of opening up the system

Pupils are educated within a given form of organized schooling, which may in itself lead to inequalities becoming apparent to a greater
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or lesser extent. Thus the emergence of inequalities in education will naturally be deferred by a system in which school provision is available to all for many years. Indeed, as long as all pupils receive an education, no form of inequality will be visible, except perhaps qualitative inequalities in the level of attainment, or in the course options or branches of education on which students embark. Conversely, in systems in which many children are prematurely denied education beyond a certain age, as in the developing countries, social inequalities in education are greater; in general, the more poorly developed the provision, the more marked they are (Mingat and Suchaut, 2000, in relation to Africa).

In the short term, therefore, the most rapid and effective means of ensuring that as many people as possible receive proper schooling is to increase access to education, reduce the selective aspects of curricula, and smooth out school survival patterns (i.e. overall arrangements determining transfer or survival rates at each successive level of education). In all industrialized countries, the expansion of education systems has meant their automatic extension to greater numbers of people (particularly at the point of entry to lower secondary education), which has been reflected in a looser relationship between social background and level of education reached (OECD, 1997). But this trend is tightly circumscribed by the structure of any given system. According to Müller and Karle (1993), differences between countries in the scale of social inequality throughout school education stem primarily from organizational patterns in the system and how it handles its flow of pupils rather than from any distinctively national particularities in the strength of the association between social background and progress at school.

Yet international comparisons also reveal that greater openness in a system does not result in a lowering of inequality either immediately or in all cases. At the beginning of periods of expansion, an increase in certain inequalities may even be noted, as children from privileged backgrounds become the first to benefit from fresh opportunities for as long as their full-time school attendance rates have (still) not reached 100 per cent. A great deal also depends on the resources available: If they are limited, as in certain developing countries, opening up the education system may go hand in hand with a lowering of quality and
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an increase in inequality. Furthermore, and most important, if the effect of simply opening up the system is to distribute educational provision more fairly, social disparities will tend to shift. In most European countries, lower secondary schools accepted a more socially mixed intake as this level of education was extended to an entire age-group (with the same kind of provision for all), whereas inequalities shifted to the point of entry to upper secondary education. Inequality thus reappears at subsequent points of transition, which in international comparisons points to the conclusion that they persist (cf. the title of the book by Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993: Persistant inequality).

Nevertheless, as a whole, supply-side policies usually have an important equalizing effect on access to education. Accordingly, in economically advanced countries, the general implementation of co-education (enacted in most cases to simplify the administration of school enrolments) has played a part in reducing inequalities between the sexes, and deliberate policies to distribute school facilities evenly throughout each country have helped to significantly reduce geographical disparities – two trends that are the norm in almost all European countries. By contrast, it is harder to see how social inequalities at school would decrease if enrolments remained at the same level, as a redistribution of educational opportunities would be required.

Yet while increasing access to education is always a matter of policy (and an effective policy at that), its effect in terms of social inequality is far from clear-cut: by opening the gateway of opportunity at any time, the State may decide overtly or implicitly to enable those who are already best educated to retain all they have, even though groups initially less well placed may improve their position. In this case, therefore, expansion operates like a safety valve or mechanism for social order. It provides for a cut-off point in levels of social inequality while encouraging the most privileged to take full advantage of higher levels of education, as long as these levels too are affected by the growth in numbers and may be freely accessed. Expansion is thus both a reform that tends to greater equality and, in certain respects, a similarly political counter-reform enabling the most privileged to maintain their advantage by shifting its focus.
Basically, young people from privileged backgrounds redefine their forward position by going further forward still, or by appropriating particular branches of education or study options, whereas those from disadvantaged backgrounds may feel they have progressed socially when they compare their situation with that of their parents. There is thus a ready demand for increasingly expanded provision which corresponds to a consensual policy for young people and teachers (who witness the expansion of their market for employment) no less than for the business sector, which has everything to gain by employing more highly trained young people at times of uncertainty regarding the future demand for skills, and given also that the training provided costs them nothing.

However, a key point of exceptional significance when countries possess limited resources is that opening up the system is a costly policy, which often calls for trade-offs between its different levels. These compromises have implications in terms of equity because, where they occur, countries prioritize the interests of particular social groups: the quantitative pattern of educational provision for children and young people at various levels (as well as of social inequalities and their attendant costs) tends to sustain inequality. Basically, the further development of higher education is in the interests of social groups whose children are already receiving upper secondary education, whereas policies for ensuring that all pupils are educated to a minimum level tends to be of greater benefit to more working-class families whose children do not all reach that level. This applies even more to the case of poor countries (Mingat and Suchaut, 2000) where the foregoing trade-offs are more radical still, particularly as higher education, which is invariably costly, leads to substantial expenditure on behalf of a marginal proportion of the population, while not all children are receiving primary education. The scale of social inequality within a country is therefore affected by these major decisions of a structural nature; and, with no concomitant expansion of resources, any provision for greater numbers implies that means should, to some extent, be redistributed across types and levels of education whose costs and enrolment rates differ and which have a hierarchical structure (pupils not enrolled in primary education will never reach higher education).
Finally, in all countries an undesirable (though unintended) effect of the expansion of education systems may emerge: in reality, there is a high risk that changes in the structure of employment and, in concrete terms, the capacity of the economy to absorb jobs will not mirror changes in the structure of educational throughput and that, as a result, qualifications will become devalued. Devaluation of this kind is now apparent in countries such as France, where secondary education expanded dramatically between 1985 and 1995. While the baccalaureate offered those born before and up to 1967 a one-in-two chance of securing employment as an executive or in a middle-level profession, this kind of occupation now tends to go with possession of a first degree or an initial period of technological training (completed two years after the baccalaureate), which means that someone with the baccalaureate will soon have a one-in-two chance of getting a job as a manual or white-collar worker (Chauvel, 1998). Such cases correspond to an entirely rational inflation of the demand for education, since more education is required to secure the same return. The scale of this inflation tends to vary depending on how systems are organized: it is stronger in systems in which the purpose of qualifications is mainly to offer criteria for positions in the ‘queue’ stretching from top to bottom of a one-dimensional hierarchy, rather than to testify demonstrably to the possession of specific skills (Shavit and Müller, 1998). This inflation comes at a price to the State and the productivity for the community of these increasingly higher and more numerous qualifications remains somewhat questionable (even though the State may recover some of its investment through the progressive increase in taxation). As regards the individuals concerned who are obliged to study for longer periods, ‘reverse redistribution’ occurs, since those who have been educated for longest are the most privileged. Conversely, those in the weakest positions in the race for qualifications become increasingly sidelined. The effect of opening up access to any level of education may be entirely negated because qualifications no longer procure the same benefits for those who possess them; the level of social inequality thus remains unchanged in spite of efforts by the State and families to prolong children’s education.

A decision may nonetheless be taken to open up the system in spite of these unwanted effects because education is regarded as having an intrinsic value (acquiring greater learning is a benefit in itself) and
not merely a means to an end (positioning oneself vis-à-vis competitors). If so, the fact that all young people progress further is not without social and cultural significance. Yet all young people provided for still have to satisfactorily complete their studies so that a more uniform level of attainment goes hand in hand with greater equality in terms of access. But many countries that have introduced policies for educational expansion have witnessed more frequent cases of drop-out from education and/or the persistence of a hard core of very weak pupils who are even more marginalized because the general level of education is rising (as, for example, in Denmark; see OECD, 1997). Policies aimed at greater equality in terms of careers and educational achievement respectively have to be implemented at different levels, ranging from organization of the system to the various kinds of teaching conducted in the classroom.

Action vis-à-vis differences inherent in the system

Policies for opening up the system are often accompanied by reforms intended specifically to reorganize it. This applies to reforms that involve postponing initial selection procedures and prolonging the duration of common or core curricula. The OECD countries have reported that social inequalities tend to be more marked wherever branches or streams of provision exist from the outset of lower secondary education onwards for pupils aged 14, or even as young as 12, or at least where common or core curricula are offered for only a very short period (OECD, 2001). Conversely, extending the duration of common curricula, introducing possible transfer points from one type of provision to another, or doing away with potential (institutional or financial) barriers to progress at an early stage tend to attenuate social inequalities. This occurred in Sweden with the introduction of the Grundskola from 1950 onwards, which provided for no choice of courses during the nine years of common provision for all. Such structural changes reduce the need to devise long-term strategies, which are always socially selective, and they nip in the bud self-selective forms of family behaviour, whose different social manifestations have already been discussed. Yet introducing selection at a given level may also, under certain circumstances, prove to be in the general interest. This is the case if it counters the natural effects
of self-selection (since as long as there is open access at the level concerned, even children of barely average ability from well-to-do backgrounds may take advantage of it). Yet the impact of this policy depends on the level of education at which selection is introduced: at a high level, social inequality may be more marked, with greater numbers of children from comfortable backgrounds obtaining very good grades. An appropriate balance thus has to found between free access, which is never entirely socially balanced, and strict selection procedures, in which all but the most privileged are eliminated.

Besides prompting unusually early decisions, the existence at a very early stage of distinct branches or types of education of very variable duration and with markedly different career prospects is also conducive to social inequality within education systems. Indeed, these separate forms of provision are associated with clearly dissimilar choices made on behalf of children whose parents have differing intentions and cannot all mobilize (financial and information) resources on the same scale. This is the situation in countries such as Germany (and several other German-speaking countries) where education has remained diversified and access to the Gymnasium (the most secure path to satisfactory completion of general upper secondary education) is notable, as already pointed out, for marked social inequalities, which have recently tended to become more acute. Conversely, the Hauptschule (which excludes any ‘long’ form of secondary education) is particularly disregarded by the most privileged social groups – a phenomenon which is also tending to become more marked. In this way, very contrasting educational and life environments are formed at an unusually early stage which, given the ‘contextual effects’ discussed earlier, is bound to heighten irreversibly the fairly strong educational and social inequalities among pupils in Germany, in conjunction with a somewhat mediocre level of ability if international comparisons are anything to go by.

The expression démocratisation ségrégative (‘segregative democratization’) has been coined in France (Merle, 2002) to describe the fact that opening up the system (and therefore making secondary education available to all) has had a very differing impact on the various branches of upper secondary education (in which pupils prepare for the different categories of baccalaureate). There has been a
noticeable recent trend towards more marked divisions between (technological) branches catering for increasing numbers of children from working-class backgrounds, and just the opposite trend in the (scientific) branches to which recruitment is more socially selective. The geographical distribution of these forms of provision may also generate social inequalities in so far as working-class children tend to be particularly dependent on local schools. Finally, the scale of the differences between schools is itself partly dependent on the scale of inequality in their social intake.

All in all, the impact of any lack of distinction between different forms of education or school context on social inequalities is not clear-cut. It might be supposed that, in principle, diversified provision is more capable of satisfying the expectations of a clientele from all walks of life, without laying down just one blueprint for educational excellence. Yet comparative research gives very little credence to this thesis: Entirely uniform organizational arrangements (with a long period of identical provision for all prior to any form of selection, and schools that are essentially the same) do indeed appear to be socially less selective (Crahay, 2000; OECD, 2001). Thus countries such as Korea or Finland, with systems that are only slightly diversified (within relatively homogeneous societies), are among the most socially egalitarian. Certain historical developments also shed some light on the matter. Evaluation of educational reforms, such as the general expansion of comprehensive schools in Scotland (McPherson and Willms, 1987), has also shown that it is the concomitant unification of organizational arrangements (and not the more educational aspects of these schools) that has reduced social inequalities in performance (particularly by improving the attainment of young people from poor backgrounds).

These findings are easy enough to accept if the educational and psychosocial processes referred to in Chapter III are borne in mind. This is, first, because the allocation of pupils to branches or groups that form an educational hierarchy is, in general, conducive to social imbalance (with working-class pupils over-represented in the weak groups); secondly, because when allocated to groups of contrasting ability, the strong become stronger and the weak weaker; but, finally, also because constant daily contact with a particular class or group
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influences the attitudes and values of pupils, affecting how well they do at school. And it is a fact that the scale of social inequality appears greater the more one moves from systems that are entirely uniform (such as those of the Scandinavian or Asian countries) to countries with little diversification but with classes containing pupils all of the same level (France and, to an even greater extent, Belgium), and then on to countries that have retained distinct branches or forms of provision (Germany or Luxembourg). Admittedly, such divergences in curricula are inevitable once they are intended as a prelude to professional activity, but they should be situated over and above the common level which a country considers should first be reached by an entire age cohort.

The manner in which allocation of these various types of provision is administered is crucial. In this respect, schools may adopt a relatively ‘meritocratic’ approach, in such a way that this ad hoc meritocracy does not graft new forms of inequality onto the social inequalities already inherent in the educational ranking of pupils when a particular path is to be chosen. On the other hand, pupils may be pointed in a particular direction in accordance with what their families want, in which case the social inequalities articulated via such preferences, as we have seen, will bolster those already inherent in the educational ranking. Greater social inequality is to be expected wherever the preferences of families are decisive, and somewhat less when the latter do no more than comment on the proposals made by teachers in accordance with educational criteria.

This might provide a clue to understanding the somewhat inegalitarian nature of certain education systems in that decisions to opt for a particular form of provision might, up to a point, depend on school pupil assessment scores. Even if these scores (and particularly the highest and those leading to the best forms of provision) remain affected by social inequalities, by attaching considerable importance to them, the effect of family preferences is limited and the performance of pupils counts for relatively more than what families request; this diminishes the significant self-selection characteristic of working-class people. Naturally, if making all forms of provision potentially available to everyone means more ‘meritocratic’ decision-making, it is clear that this meritocracy is justifiable only if there is a simultaneous drive
to iron out the early inequalities in performance reflected in unequal assessment scores.

All in all, certain policies may attach greater importance to the range of provision and expansion, and others to how the system is organized: thus the United States appears primarily to have gone for openness and mass education, whereas Sweden seems to have invested greater effort in specifically reducing the association between social background and school career (while also lessening inequality in terms of living conditions). Yet although both countries have followed different approaches that are effective in so far as social inequalities associated with school have diminished in both cases, there is no resultant distinction between them as regards the scale of such inequalities. This clearly suggests that vigorous expansion of the system (in the United States) may offset the effects of school achievement which varies more sharply than in Sweden (and also, as we shall discuss further, the impact of social inequality which is far more marked).

Should action be taken to regulate the system?

Many countries throughout the world have introduced policies combining greater autonomy for schools with greater opportunities for choice on the part of parents. This affects how the system is regulated by granting more power to local players and users. These reforms are primarily justified by concern for effectiveness. Some comparative studies, such as research by Wössman (2000), show that the way countries perform is indeed related more to the structure of prevailing incentives in their education system than the scale of the resources invested in it. It so happens that giving schools greater decision-making autonomy (but also emphasizing pupil assessment) appears to be instrumental to their effectiveness, although it should be noted that this type of investigation is concerned solely with establishing correlations, whose causal significance is inconclusive. Yet autonomy is sometimes also intended as a means to greater equity: On the one hand, more autonomous schools are arguably in a better position to adapt their practices to their pupils, and particularly the most disadvantaged; on the other, when parents have greater scope for choosing their child’s school, the intention is to give everyone a right which currently may be exercised solely by well-to-do families, if
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only because they are freer to choose where they live (people talk of doing away with ‘selection via rent levels’).

It is very hard to evaluate scrupulously the impact of different methods of regulating education systems, as such methods are intricately linked to many other characteristics. International comparisons point to no clear relation between greater school autonomy and enhanced pupil performance. Everything depends, however, on the areas in which this autonomy may be exercised: performance appears to be better where the content of curricula and examinations is centrally determined, but staff management is the prerogative of the school and teachers are responsible for choosing textbooks and teaching methods. Neither is there any firm correlation between greater autonomy and the scale of the differences distinguishing one school from the next, which themselves might be prejudicial to fairness; it should be recalled that all these scenarios exist, as exemplified by Finland which is one of the most equitable of countries having relatively autonomous and broadly similar schools. What is certain is that for autonomy to be in any way determinant it must lead to real changes in educational approach, which is not always the case. It must also be combined with systems for assessing the progress of pupils and use of the results for monitoring purposes. With this form of retrospective regulation, autonomy may well serve to stimulate schools and contribute to greater effectiveness and, therefore, greater equity. Yet it has to be firmly accepted that their work should be governed by centrally determined curricula, since if this is not the case, educational and social distinctions between pupils will only become sharper, as autonomy leads to changes in content and in local approaches to teaching.

Research into the impact of policies affecting the choice of school also leads to nothing more than tentative findings. On the whole, these policies have no impact on the performance of pupils, even though this does not make the former less attractive to families. As regards fairness, their impact is very much affected by the way in which scope for choice is organized. If choice is very circumscribed, as in certain experiments conducted in America (with quota systems based, for example, on ethnic criteria, or lottery arrangements), then the choice of school may result in less social (and ethnic) polarization.
than school mapping. On the other hand, in countries that exercise total freedom of choice, this generally leads to greater social segregation among schools (Karsten, 1994, with reference to the Netherlands). This is the outcome of strategies adopted by families when choosing a school; the most privileged families seek to remain closely bonded, as do ethnic minorities given that the level of segregation at school is basically related to segregation in the local residential environment. Conversely, (social and ethnic) segregation between schools is less distinct in countries that have maintained national regulations to limit school autonomy and/or parental choice. Even though these regulations may often be circumvented by the most well informed families, they tend to limit the scale of social inequality. This is important because it should not be forgotten that international comparisons point to a correlation between social segregation between schools and the scale of social inequality.

Generally speaking, a lack of national regulations for confronting strategically-minded families of unequal strength just when educational establishments are becoming more autonomous leads to the development of those inequalities attributable to contextual diversity. One thing is certain: Decentralization without rigorous assessment in accordance with clear guidelines as to content, and then monitoring on this basis, would imperil the evenness of performance and attitudes of an entire age-group and, by the same token, endanger social integration.

**Optimizing and introducing greater uniformity into the quality of school provision and teaching practice**

As already discussed, access to a particular school is not totally inconsequential in terms of social inequality to the extent that, in most countries, a major share of the advantage held by young people from privileged backgrounds derives from access to better quality schools. Variations in evenness of quality in school provision within each country account, in part, for variations in the scale of social inequalities in attainment from one country to the next. A policy intended to reduce social inequality should therefore entail evening out the quality of provision. This is difficult as families play a significant part in
determining the quality of the school context: As a result of their choices, they create large groups of pupils who are more or less inclined to learning, and confronted with whom schools, for their part, may appear largely powerless.

There is, as we have seen, a whole area of debate regarding the leeway schools possess, given the limiting factor their pupils represent. Set against the optimism of those who are devotees of the ‘school effectiveness’ theory, which claims to identify processes that all schools might introduce (irrespective of parameters dependent on their intake), is a form of radical pessimism about their room for manoeuvre. Research indicates that it is indeed easier to be effective when working with privileged pupils, but also, notwithstanding this, that the achievements of schools catering for comparable populations vary very widely. All schools may thus discover effective means of moving closer towards what they are seeking to achieve. In particular, while concerted action on their part is not always guaranteed to improve things, it is unlikely to be totally ineffectual; indeed, it would seem that failure to mobilize amounting to relative anomy is especially detrimental to the weakest and/or most disadvantaged pupils. Yet what any such mobilization actually entails appears crucial: It will impact on how (the weakest) pupils progress (and therefore on the scale of inequalities) only if it goes to the very heart of educational activity and what happens in the classroom rather than incidental aspects of school life. It also seems to have a bearing on the socialization of pupils. Indeed, the same applies to mobilization as to all aspects of the context in that their impact is indirect and mediated by an entire range of instructional or interactional processes. In other words, the context exerts an influence by affecting the probability that a particular cognitive or psychosocial process will occur, and that pupils will undergo a particular cognitive experience of an incontrovertibly social nature.

Regardless of the scale of mobilization, action will focus on those numerous forms of decentralized behaviour (down to the level of the teacher/pupil relationship) that condition the effectiveness of a school or teacher. In fact, the incentive-based approach (referred to previously) may well be more effective: Each school would be left to choose its own forms of action, whose impact on its pupils would then, crucially, be evaluated after the event. However, policy-makers have to provide
for equality between schools – in terms of their resources, the quality of their education, and their intake – which will often call for vigorous positive discrimination, so that school inequalities do not fan the flames of social inequality. They are also responsible for limiting the effect of individual family strategies by means of school mapping or supervising school choice in order to control their social mix; in this way, they can counter the emergence of a market consisting of increasingly diversified schools, which furthers a social segregation that, in itself, makes for inequality. Either policy-makers manage to eliminate this segregation (through strict supervision or the physical transfer of pupils) or, alternatively, they eliminate its effects by resorting to very firm positive discrimination: In this case, they will seek to recreate the advantages that social segregation is capable of generating in terms of quality, wherever its effects are beneficial (general orderliness, optimal learning time, etc.). In a public system of education, it is, in any event, incumbent on the State to ensure that all schools offer provision of equal quality so that pupils can indeed achieve its declared academic or civic objectives.

However, the full measure of what pupils learn is determined at the highly decentralized level of the classroom. From this it may once more be concluded that it would be pointless to legislate centrally for precise standards in education. It is doubtless preferable to leave the initiative to action in the field, on the strict condition, first, that care is taken to evaluate its impact, and, secondly, that precautionary measures in the form of national curricula and standardized evaluation procedures are established to prevent the adverse consequences of adapting practices to pupils.

A further sense in which research points to the advisability of delegating to the grass roots the search for effective teaching procedures is that it has not identified any method as being either intrinsically effective or ineffective. In particular, the effectiveness of teaching practice and arrangements is always context-related in that their impact depends on the persons at whom they are directed. In fact, where teaching is concerned, the devil is in the detail. Thus, even if, as we have noted, a differential approach to teaching tends to have perverse and undesirable consequences for pupils, not all aspects of such an approach should be ruled out. Progress may be more effective and
uniform if the concern to adjust to each pupil’s level is reflected in the organization of flexible homogeneous groups (in accordance with mastery teaching; see Crahay, 2000) or, more simply, by means of detailed comments on marked work or the personalized provision of advice. Similarly, while reducing class size will more often than not have little effect (Hanushek, 1997), experimental initiatives in the English-speaking world demonstrate that this rule has its exceptions: significantly decreasing the size of classes containing children who are very young and from the most working-class backgrounds may have positive effects (special edition of Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 1999).

Research sometimes yields more unequivocal findings about certain specific arrangements or practices. This applies particularly to the case of repetition, which is very widespread in Belgium and France, given that one pupil in five falls behind in secondary education (5 per cent of children from managerial-class backgrounds, and 42 per cent of children of unskilled workers). Yet this practice places children in a precarious position (Crahay, 1996): The subsequent performances of those who have repeated a year are less satisfactory than those of their counterparts who have not, and they suffer from much lower self-esteem. This practice therefore tends to sharpen inequalities between pupils, as well as social inequalities.

The effects of arrangements for pupils in difficulty vary widely, but they are often disappointing. True, the British so-called study support initiatives (comprising a set of learning activities organized outside school hours) lead to improved results and greater motivation (Mac Beath et al., 2001). Yet such arrangements also frequently have perverse effects with no change in average level, and sometimes even bring about a decrease in the latter and can give rise to greater social inequality. This applies just as much to remedial action at a very early age as to the various procedures for assisting pupils in primary school or in secondary education. At the root of these inequalities, which are engendered specifically by such arrangements, is, first, the question of how pupils selected for special attention are identified given that the criteria are never totally rigid; in particular, if there is free access to arrangements for support, pupils who are doing perfectly well will request it, while weaker pupils will not benefit
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from it. Secondly, social imbalance will occur: In most cases, and given the same attainment levels, children from working-class backgrounds will be allocated as a matter of course to forms of assistance intended for weak pupils. This will be the result both of the subjective impressions of teaching staff and family strategies; families will either seek to avoid a particular form of compensatory provision in the belief that it carries a stigma, or, on the contrary, accept the advice of the institution concerned.

Furthermore, and crucially, where such arrangements are negative in their impact, they themselves sometimes give rise to inequality. Occasionally, it has been noted that pupils who rely on them progress less than others at exactly the same level who do not. But the most frequently reported outcome is that they have no real impact, a neutral result perhaps concealing educational effects that might prove positive were they not countered by the adverse effects of labelling (in the case of pupils initially assumed to be in difficulty, who are treated as if they were, and thus end up as such). Time management issues are also a determinant: Either extra time is added to normal school hours, which becomes increasingly less productive, or pupils are removed from their customary working context and are thereby denied normally profitable time in order to pursue alternative activities that prove less worthwhile in terms of learning.

Some of these arrangements are in the form of actions devised at the level of particular geographical areas in which pupils in difficulty may be concentrated. In the interests of greater effectiveness, one of the principles of such action is joint mobilization of the various services in the area concerned without focusing exclusively on the school. This applied to Title I from 1965 onwards in the United States, then the Educational Priority Areas in Great Britain, or the priority educational areas in France. But having large numbers of certain pupils clustered together (and therefore the resultant social and school mix) may, in itself, be a source of difficulty. Another basic principle is the concept of positive discrimination, implying that actions and resources have to be intensively mobilized wherever problems are glaringly at their worst.
The impact of organizational factors, and feasible policies

The findings of research attempting to assess the effects of such initiatives on pupils have been partially conclusive (in the case of Title 1, for example, Vinovskis, 1999). First of all, it is clear that in no country have policies for positive discrimination managed to completely close the gap that exists between the performance of the most privileged and that of the most disadvantaged pupils. They have only managed to reduce it slightly, at best. Yet it would seem that these policies have had a more positive impact on the way pupils relate to school, or on their socialization in general, than on their academic attainment. Here again, moreover, the methods actually used to implement them are crucially important (selection, as far as possible, of those who are the most needy, action appropriately targeted at academic learning, etc.). In addition, the results achieved differ very considerably from one area to the next, thus demonstrating how it is important to mobilize reliable local teams for support. Before dismissing the concept of area-targeted schemes, possible reasons for their relative failure should be analyzed more thoroughly; in particular, one should distinguish between factors attributable to the inclusion of pupils in areas identified for priority attention, along with the labelling of pupils and drop-out that are both associated with this (contributing to segregation and its pernicious effects), and factors that have to do with a lowering of requirements and focusing on aims other than learning (social integration, responsiveness to other cultures, etc.), or yet again with the particular teaching practices adopted.

In the final analysis, it is an open question whether it may not be more effective to take action more closely concerned with individual pupils rather than with a given area, or whether it might not be more appropriate to tackle the problem of social segregation itself (or at least alter the social mix of schools), rather than intervening after the event to limit its adverse consequences. It is evident that there is little room for manoeuvre in the pursuit of equity. On the one hand, targeted initiatives (or those taken on behalf of fixed groups) often have negative effects attributable to a variety of processes (labelling phenomena, self-fulfilling prophecies, etc.), and therefore intensify differences to the detriment of weak pupils and/or those from working-class backgrounds, for whom these schemes mostly cater. On the other hand, general arrangements such as counselling procedures or services available to all (libraries, various forms of educational assistance) are
often appropriated by already privileged pupils, who then use them to their advantage.

To conclude, regardless of whether action is directed at the structure of the system or the way it is regulated or, at a level much closer to pupils, whether it is concerned with a particular system of teaching, it is important in predicting its impact (on average effectiveness and on inequality among pupils) to try and anticipate the strategies of the players concerned and, specifically, those changes in strategy that any such action is meant to provoke.
VI. Policies well beyond the remit of the school

Irrespective of educational policies and prospects for action focused on education or teaching, the families of the pupils cannot be disregarded. They are directly involved in the initial socialization of their children and in supporting them through school, as well as in nurturing educational aspirations on their behalf and, additionally, devising strategies for realizing them, while confronted by other pressures of all kinds.

Given that social inequalities in attainment are apparent at a very early age and seem to be the result of parental practices not equally geared to children’s development, it is justifiable to consider whether parents should receive training for best practice in this respect. Since the 1970s, very extensive programmes have been devised with the aim of compensating for the less stimulating nature of certain family environments. One example is the Head Start programme in the United States, but many so-called ‘parent education’ programmes also exist in countries such as Belgium or Canada (Pourtois, 1991). Their purpose is to make parents more responsive to the needs of their children and, more important still, to provide the former with certain specific forms of expertise for interacting with them (linguistic exercises, reading books, learning incentives, etc.). Sometimes, as in the case of certain American ‘school intervention programmes’, the aim is to inform parents precisely what they should do to assist their children with learning. While just as controversial as area-targeted initiatives, these programmes targeted at very young children are not ineffectual from the standpoint of social integration and performance at school, particularly in the medium term, even though their effectiveness depends considerably on the care and conviction with which they are implemented. Yet because they are cumbersome, they inevitably have to be directed at very disadvantaged groups, which means they result in labelling and its attendant stigmatization. For very young children, day-care facilities may also be established (as in some relatively poor Latin American countries; see Willms and Somers, 2001) with a
beneficial effect on children’s subsequent education, thus compensating, to some extent, for social inequality. But in many countries, it is considered simpler and more straightforward to promote measures such as providing material assistance for educating children, or developing relations between the family and the school. These very widespread policies are rarely evaluated in their own right and, here again, the possibility that they may have perverse effects cannot be ruled out; for example, parents closest to the school may be the best placed to benefit most from closer relations with teachers, which favour their children’s full integration at school, thus maximizing their performance.

More complex to implement, finally, would be actions intended to encourage social mix in schools. This is because there are conflicts of interest between families: On the one hand, well-to-do families, whose children are generally good pupils, have everything to gain by staying grouped together in schools, thus creating a general atmosphere that is conducive to study and stimulating for their children. However, the existence of schools for the privileged gives rise to schools at the opposite end of the social spectrum, which, in fact, run counter to the interests of their pupils. As already discussed, therefore, social heterogeneity is especially beneficial to these pupils, although it may slightly inhibit the progress of the most privileged. In other words, schools (and classes) with a more diversified social mix lead to a slight reduction in the level of the elite, while raising the level of the weakest. The result is a conflict of interest in which the State may act with regard to the general interest by opting for heterogeneity to raise the average achievement of a given age-group to the highest possible level. Yet it will be no easy matter persuading the families of the children who will lose out, however slightly. One possible argument for heterogeneity is its contribution to social integration and the benefits that go with it. Perhaps the existence of very marked positive discrimination, so that schools logically at a disadvantage would be made particularly attractive, would act as an incentive to those parents who, understandably enough, are out to secure the best possible school environment for their children. But families themselves are situated in a broader environment, in relation to which action also cannot be ignored.
A comprehensive social policy to support changes in schools

A number of policies not focused specifically on the organizational arrangements and functioning of initial training are liable to exert a significant influence over social inequality among young people. As already discussed, it is by no means certain that the expansion of education will not lead to greater inequality. Now, this becomes increasingly likely the more people’s lifelong career paths are shaped by their initial training. The extent to which this occurs varies from one European country to the next. Thus in some countries, such as the United Kingdom or Finland, part-time studies and re-training are far more frequent than in other countries, like Luxembourg, Greece or France, given that part-time enrolment rates among those aged 30-39 in the first two countries stand at 10 per cent or over, compared to under 2 per cent in the second group (OECD, 2002). In countries such as France, in which the transfer from school to the labour market is unusually uncompromising and irremediable, social inequalities in access to initial training are of major significance, particularly in that it is the most highly trained people who subsequently benefit more from continuing or in-service training.

Furthermore, the precise pattern of relations between education or training and employment, which varies significantly depending on national circumstances, may be such as to reflect to a greater or lesser extent the impact of social background at any given level of qualification. Relations between training and employment are closer when the education system appears to be based on standard principles throughout a country and structured into distinctly hierarchical types of provision; similarly, relations between them are far more firmly defined when specific forms of vocational training correspond to each particular professional category. Wherever these various characteristics exist in combination, the successive levels of completed training and qualification are far clearer for employers to interpret. Conversely, where qualifications appear to correspond neither to a clear hierarchy nor specifically to any one group of professions, relations between education or training and employment are much looser and, in addition to the inflation of qualifications already referred to, may be expected
to reflect a greater degree of social inequality when people join the labour market (Shavit and Müller, 1998).

Subsequently, as careers progress, social background will continue to exert an influence, at comparable levels of qualification, on occupational mobility in particular. This dominance – which is a further ‘bonus’ for children from privileged backgrounds, at a given level of training – is often comparable in its intensity to social inequalities in access to a particular type of training. All in all, how far the pattern of relations between training and employment shape social inequalities remains a broadly open question. But one major point is clear: Allowing for differences that stem from organizational patterns and education policies, similarity nonetheless appears the dominant characteristic when comparing trends in social fluidity (the association between the social positions of parents and their children, respectively) in the industrialized countries. The bond between social background and social destiny thus appears to be very strong and, on the face of it, relatively independent from the education system that contributes to its regeneration.

It is far less clear whether this is a basis for assuming, as do some sociologists (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996), that education is just one link in the process of social regeneration and that its current significance may be overestimated. It is certain that inequalities between social milieux in life derive from many other mechanisms, foremost among which are naturally the marked inequalities of position in the social division of labour. Schools only intervene intermittently (and at present in a limited way) to correct (where possible) inequalities of opportunity among children which owe their existence to the former. As things stand at least, they appear to be barely capable of countering the stronger influence of the family, the market for social positions, and historical circumstances.

Doubtless the most important consideration is that schools should cater for pupils whose inequality is less marked. As a result, the top priority may well be to combat directly social inequalities (between families), rather than assuming that they can be indirectly tackled at school. The few countries that have really provided more educational
opportunities for everyone, such as Sweden (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993), are countries which, far from merely undertaking especially bold educational reforms, have reduced inequalities associated with economic risk through a variety of long-term policies involving extensive inter-ministerial planning; as families thereby come to feel more secure, the choices open to all pupils are less vulnerable to risk and, therefore, less subject to inequality. A lessening of career-related social inequalities may similarly be expected when economic inequalities become more blurred, as has indeed been observed in Sweden and the Netherlands. Yet again, combating acute poverty among children, which has been the foremost aim of several policies in the United Kingdom, is arguably an effective means of reducing inequality among pupils (Glass, 1999). Conversely, international surveys clearly demonstrate that a greater effort is required of systems to achieve more uniform attainment levels among pupils, irrespective of their social background, when conspicuous social inequalities exist among them.

Not everything hinges on what happens at school, for it is an institution embedded in a context in which social inequality is the norm both upstream (in families) and downstream (in positions they seek to occupy). Indeed, the strong inequalities sometimes apparent in social and professional positions are crucially significant in fuelling inequalities at school. It is clear that, when unequally endowed parents seek to propel their children towards unequal positions, inequalities that surface at school can hardly be significantly reduced. For groups in a dominant position, it is only natural that schools should be no more than a means to their own ends.
VII. Conclusion

Policies intended to reduce social inequalities at school have to be responsive to a very varied range of concerns: only those which converge towards a common goal, which reflect a readiness for action at all levels (that of families, teachers and policy-makers), and which are sustained over time are liable to inject significant fresh momentum into oppressive trends deeply rooted in society. Action should focus, in particular, on the following:

- **What happens in the classroom:** greater uniformity in the quality of different school environments; identification and development of good practice; awareness of social bias affecting the assessment and decisions of teachers; policies concerned with the school mix of groups of pupils, etc.

- **The overall pattern of the system:** action to open it up and create greater uniformity at its initial levels; postponement of irremediable decisions; external evaluation and monitoring in accordance with explicit common aims; clearly defined and revised arrangements linking the common (or core) curriculum to specialized branches or types of provision; continuing forms of education and training; limiting the influence exerted by families, etc.

- **Children’s family environment:** fighting the earliest signs of inequality in living conditions and conditions affecting development; educating parents; development of day-care facilities for the youngest children; levelling out the resources of families and guaranteeing their economic security; less social segregation in the residential environment, etc.

These policies should be based on a certain number of general principles often running counter to prevailing ideas. They include not deferring excessively to the wishes of users, not believing that fighting inequality compromises effectiveness, or, yet again, wariness in adapting different forms of educational provision to the diversity of those being educated. Finally, one should doubtless explicitly consider
the question of how the education system contributes to the level of justice in society. It is necessary, first, to rethink very specifically the links between, on the one hand, similar provision for all with no social approbation directly attached to it, in which the need for equality would be vital and a priority for action in the public domain and, on the other, more specialized forms of provision closely related to employment, in which the question of equity would be considered in different terms.

As regards the foregoing basic provision, it would also seem desirable to concentrate more on the attainment of the weakest and on ensuring that school corresponds to a similar experience for all pupils, with a similar outcome defined as the attainment by all of a minimum common level reflecting intrinsic and not distinctive merit, rather than focusing on disparities between groups and the role of the school in social mobility. This would, in turn, lead to consideration of how far the content of school provision is truly relevant: Is it such as to ensure that individuals are capable of co-operating within society on the same footing? It is, no doubt, in this way, rather than in terms of their implications for social mobility (whose structural limits have been discussed), that schools based on more democratic principles can contribute to the development of a more democratic society.
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