

**EDUCATION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN THE URBAN SPACE:
A FRENCH EXAMPLE**

By Marco Alberio, PhD

*Department of Sociology and Social Research – University of Milano-Bicocca
Post-doctoral student with the Canada Research Chair on the Socio-Organizational
Challenges of the Knowledge Economy and
CURA on work-life articulation over the lifecourse
Téluq-UQAM*

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To contact us:

Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay
Canada Research Chair on the Socio-Organizational Challenges of the Knowledge Economy
Télé-université, Université du Québec
100 Sherbrooke West, Montréal, Québec, Canada H2X 3P4
fax : 1-514-843-2160
phone: 1-514-843-2015
email: dgtrembl@teluq.ca

Biographical notes

Dr. Marco Alberio completed his PhD in European Urban and Local Studies at the Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca in Italy under the supervision of Enzo Mingione.

His thesis focused on an international comparison dealing with the trajectories (mainly education, family and work) of young people coming from working class urban areas in Paris and Milan. Dr. Alberio has experience teaching in the area of economic and urban sociology. He worked as a teaching assistant for some years in the faculty of Sociology at Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca and presented his research at seminars and meetings in various universities such as Sciences Po Paris, activity that he is continuing in some Canadian universities such as the University of Toronto, Laval and Sherbrooke, UQAC, where he has been invited for seminars and lectures. During the academic year 2010-2011 he taught a course on cultural and urban development at IULM University in Milano.

In August 2011, Marco Alberio began his post-doctoral research with the CURA (Community-University Research Alliance) on work-life balance over the life course (www.teluq.ca/aruc-gats) in Montréal at Téléuq-UQAM with a project on the trajectories and conditions of young people in working class neighbourhoods of Montreal. This ongoing research, with the support of professor Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay, aims at understanding at which conditions, in two different national - France and Québec - and local contexts – “Haut Montreuil” in the Paris urban area (done in thesis) and St Michel, Montreal North and South-West in Montreal - the situation of a specific disadvantaged population, in particular young people, could be in danger from the point of view of social exclusion, poverty and social disadvantage. In fact, there are specific conditions, which might be different from context to context and can increase or decrease these risks, and this is the object of the research. Besides his academic activity Marco Alberio has recently collaborated with the Italian Commission for UNESCO.

Contact Info: alberio.marco@teluq.ca/Tel: (514) 843-2015 x2997.

Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay is the Canada Research Chair on the Socio-Organizational Challenges of the Knowledge Economy and director of the CURA on work-life articulation over the lifecourse (www.teluq.uqam.ca/aruc-gats). She is professor at the Télé-université of the Université du Québec. She has been invited professor in many universities, such as the Université de Paris-I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, Lille I, Angers, Toulouse, IAE of Lyon III, IAE of Lille I, in France, Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium, Université des sciences sociales de Hanoi, in Vietnam, and the European School of Management. She is very active in research on clusters and local development, employment and work-life issues, and she has published many articles and books on employment and types of employment, job training, innovation in the workplace and work organization, as well as the articulation between work and family life. See websites for details:

www.teluq.uqam.ca/chaireecosavoir

www.teluq.ca/dgtremblay

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Introduction

In this article we will try to better understand the relationship between education, inequality and social disadvantage (Townsend 1979) at the local level. In particular, we will consider the French case of the Haut Montreuil in the Paris urban area. The empirical material on which we base this paper is the product of a wider study, a qualitative research conducted through in-depth interviews¹ in a neighbourhood of Montreuil, a French town of about 100.000 inhabitants at the eastern outskirts of Paris.

The area selected - the “Haut Montreuil” formed by the neighbourhoods of Ramenas Lèò Lagrange, Branly-Boissière and Signac-Murs à Peches – is a traditional working-class area with a notable presence of immigrant origin households (in particular from Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa) and public housing projects. However, it is important to underline that there are on-going significant transformations taking place at both the socio-demographic and territorial level on this territory (Préteceille 2003, Cousin and Préteceille 2008). In fact, these neighbourhoods which we can consider as a single territorial unit (the “Haut Montreuil”) are nowadays not only populated by

¹ We did interviews to more than 80 people including young people aged 15-30 years old, their families (in most cases) and social actors at such as teachers, school directors and social assistants.

the working class but in specific areas we can find examples of “mixité sociale”². The population in this area of Montreuil is of about 30.000 inhabitants on a total of 100.000 and represents therefore a good proportion of the city itself.

Especially for what concerns the subject of this article, school and education at a local level and the relation with social disadvantage, it is important to note that even if Montreuil is an independent medium-size town, it is connected and very much “oriented” towards the capital; especially its Southern part, the “Bas Montreuil” which is connected to Paris through the underground line number 9. A feature facilitating middle class family living there, who can easier avoid local schools sending their children in the low secondary and high school of the Paris city centre. The presence of the underground and the whole gentrification process involving the Southern part of the city in the last 20 years, has created a real and deep fracture between the “Bas Montreuil” and “Haut Montreuil”, extended also to the population, public transportations and service provisions, including first of all school and the average educational offer. By the way, we should remind that important changes are affecting and will continue to affect also the “Haut Montreuil” such as for example the Acacia-Boissière residential area, a project which has been launched in 2010 by the municipality, boosting the real-estate supply and that will surely bring as a consequence a redefinition of the population’s profile.

Dealing with neighbourhoods in France, a country where specific policies have been implemented in the frame of the so called *politiques de la ville*, it is fundamental to remind that even if our area is not directly classified as *Zone Urbaine Sensible*³ and *Zone d’ Education Prioritaire*⁴ it can still present similar characteristics and problems, without at the same time receiving the allocation of resources as the *ZUS*. In addition, due to the fact that a part of our neighbourhood, the area with the highest concentration of social housing projects⁵ confines with the *ZUS* neighbourhood of Ruffins Théophile Sueur, most of the children living there are affected to the *ZUS/ZEP collège* Le Nan de Tillemont, a school presenting a very homogenous social and ethnic profile.

As we will better observe, the level of analysis is twofold, a configuration at the national but also at

² Social mix.

³ Sensitive urban zones (ZUS) are infra-urban territories defined by the authorities as being priority targets for urban policy, according to local factors relating to the difficulties that the inhabitants of these territories are experiencing. The law of 14 November 1996 to implement an urban policy recovery agreement distinguishes three levels of intervention : sensitive urban zones (ZUS) ; urban regeneration zones (ZRU) ; free urban zones (ZFU). Characterized by increasingly extensive fiscal and social measures, the three levels of intervention, ZUS, ZRU and ZFU, aim to respond to the various levels of difficulty experienced in these districts (source: insee.fr).

⁴ The ZEP - *Zone d’ Education Prioritaire* - is a program started in 1982 that channels additional resources to schools in disadvantaged areas and should encourage the development of new teaching projects.

⁵ In French *HLM*.

the urban and neighbourhood level, with all the local peculiarities (Moulaert,1995; Madanipour, Cars and Allen, 1998).

The neighbourhood represents the scale on which the institutional mechanisms concretely perform. It is indeed at this micro level of observation that we can better observe how the phenomena interesting us are shaped and crystallize with particular configurations due to local characteristics and peculiarities (strength of familiar kinships, neighbourhood solidarity, deprivation/presence of services, working opportunities, local social policies, presence of legal or illegal forms of organisations such as citizens' associations or criminal networks. etc).

«Place as *social space* crystallizes the particularity of exclusion processes, social welfare regimes, local policy, and so on, but also of local demography, network dynamics, labour market dynamics and school. Place becomes a multidimensional exclusion and integration process by itself: as a vortex of social forces, it rejects or accepts, integrates or repulses, deteriorates or upgrades its inhabitants, and so on». (Moulaert, Morlicchio and Cavola, 2008 p.150).

These processes at the local level can also be influenced by the impact of economic restructuring and as some important studies have shown (Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez 2002; Moulaert et al. 2003), socioeconomic subsystems (production, labour markets, distribution of income and wealth) have decisive power in the processes of reproduction of inequality since they have considerable impact on the local urban structure of the labour market, on income distribution but also on other phenomena such as the housing market, that can have important consequences on the local educational offer of local territories. In particular, real estate has a relevant role in residential dynamics. The processes of urban regeneration and restructuring may in some cases generate gentrification, as we noticed for our case of Montreuil, driving poor income households towards a concentration in less desirable neighbourhoods or keeping them in a certain area,generally characterized by a limited availability of services.

Thus, in Montreuil as elsewhere, there is a strong impact of public national and local policies on spatial and social polarization, phenomena which have a decisive role in the configuration of the educational offer but may change in manifestation and intensity depending on the institutional settings, at both the national and local level and also depend on the democratic control played at the local level, through for instance the role of the municipalities as institutional and political organs.

Segregation and Education

The relationship between segregation and inequality is quite a complex phenomenon because it is to be seen at various spatial levels and concerns different institutions and social practices.

An important aspect in general associated with segregation is the problem of the services and resources available at the local level. The structural characteristics of a neighbourhood in terms of the presence or absence of specific services and infrastructures such as schools are elements contributing to the quality and reputation of an area.

As some scholars have shown, opportunities of access to material and symbolic goods offered by the city are unequal (Pinçon-Charlot, Préteceille - 1986).

However, let us note that, in particular in the case of school and education, a simple consideration of the number of resources and status and quality of the premises is not enough. In fact, we should always take into consideration the quality of social relations and practices.

As some scholars have recently acknowledged (Oberti, 2007), school is an element which counts more than others for the relationship between segregation and social inequalities.

This is particularly true in the case of France, where school is at the centre of social inequalities and also in general of social relations. Around school and education, there are many strategies and much interplay deliberately implemented by middle class families in order to obtain the most prestigious educational credentials.

« Les classements et les verdicts scolaires y trouvent une traduction sociale particulièrement forte qui rejaillit sur le prestige social des individus et leur possibilité d'accès aux meilleurs positions. Objet de toutes les critiques, elle continue d'être l'institution par excellence à travers la quelle le devenir social des individus est pensé, voir fantasmé » (Oberti 2007, p. 36).

As pointed out at the end of this passage, very often the real weight and influence of education on an individuals' chances and opportunities in life seem even to be overestimated, leading to a sort of "obsession", which contributes to aggravating social inequalities.

In this specific context, attempts to access those schools having the best reputation and avoid the others considered less prestigious, due also to the characteristics of their population, seem to increase educational segregation and, in a more indirect way, also urban segregation in general.

As observed by Paugam: «Le système scolaire actuel comporte, en effet, de nombreuses filières savamment hiérarchisées, les meilleurs permettent à l'élite l'accès aux grandes écoles et aux postes les plus recherchés, les moins valorisées offrent des formations et occupations inadaptées au marché de l'emploi et ne pouvant conduire qu'au chômage. A ce mécanisme de ségrégation interne s'ajoutent les pratiques diverses et souvent subtiles des classes supérieures ou moyennes pour éviter les établissements à trop forte concentration d'enfants des catégories populaire ou immigrées, dans

lesquels les filières et les options sont souvent peu attractives et les conditions d'apprentissage parfois médiocres» (Paugam 1995, p. 568).

A decisive element to be outlined concerns the relationship between immigration and segregation, which is extremely important, since the phenomenon of over-representation of one or more ethnic groups may turn into actual segregation processes (Memo and Borlini 2009). In this perspective the French experience provides a significant example, not necessarily positive, as far as the integration of second- and third-generation immigrants, in most cases French citizens, taking place at school.

However, it is important not to limit our considerations on educational segregation to immigration.

To conclude this preliminary discussion on the relationship between education and segregation, what we will try to do with the empirical analysis is to better clarify the underlying mechanisms and dynamics in our French context. In doing so, we will bear in mind that social relations, including those happening at school as a physical place and around school as an institution, are hierarchically structured in a social and urban space.

Attempt to design a theoretical framework

In a constant shift from the macro to the micro level and vice versa we have to analyse also the relationship between individuals and social structures, observing the particular strategies implemented by the actors involved.

In our perspective, we will recognize the primary role played by the structure, albeit without neglecting the importance and relevance of the actor itself. In fact, Bourdieu himself recognized a change in his perspective. In *La Reproduction* (1970) the “*habitus*” appeared as strictly determined by objective constraints, while later on, in *Le sens pratique* (1980), he acknowledged that, despite the existence of a limiting structure, the strategies of actors could also play an important role.

As Bourdieu explicitly says, comparing the actor to a good player (*Bon Jouer*), the individual is half way between the rules framing his action and the freedom of his choice. Translating this concept, we can say that in this theoretical frame the context of action gains relevance. Specific capabilities and resources of the individuals emerge and can therefore be applied.

At the same time, the other main theoretical reference, the so called rational theory or “*théorie de l'acteur*” does not forget to frame the individual action in a defined structure of constraints, with the understanding that the actor cannot be totally free in his behaviour.

However, despite some important theoretical convergences, the conclusions of these two approaches to school and education are quite different.

The theories of reproduction, such as those of Bourdieu and Passeron, focus on social inequalities in educational attainment and school success. Here, the function and functioning of education are contemporaneously considered. They state that the main function of education is not mere transmission of knowledge and skills, but on the contrary it seems to be the one of giving sanctions, which are apparently independent of and external to social inequalities. Thus these theories make a distinction between the official function of education, which is not implemented and the latent one, which consists in providing legitimization for social inequalities.

On the contrary, the other theoretical reference represented by Boudon, underestimates the role and relevance of education, considering school and academic certificates just as a first step towards professional insertion and therefore as an element playing only a limited role.

An example could be seen in the differences attested in educational performance between boys and girls. Even if women usually have better school results, as shown by many international data, this does not correspond to better socio-professional positions (Duru-Bellat 2004; Checchi, Fiorio, Leonardi 2006), which clearly shows how social inequalities are not limited to education but are within a wider and more complex framework.

Starting from this point, some scholars (Moore, 1996) hypothesise overestimation of the role of education in determining social status and position. According to Boudon, social stratification, through an intermediation of the actor, whose strategies always move in a social framework, seems to be the main cause of unequal educational and social opportunities.

Within this perspective, the two main theoretical references, represented respectively by Bourdieu and Boudon, maintaining all their significant differences, could converge. In fact, both express pessimism about the role of school and education in reducing the impact of social inequalities (Duru-Bellat and Van Zanten 2006).

These two classical approaches are concerned with the relationship between education and social inequalities but nevertheless, neither of them showed any interest in providing a deep analysis of internal school dynamics.

We, on the contrary, as other scholars, mean to investigate in detail the mechanisms by which social inequalities are produced and reproduced at school.

In particular, from the macro and micro perspective, we intend to analyse: access of pupils and students to particular schools; their subsequent population and the interactions inside the peer group, which, as we have seen, could have an influence on educational attainment; the role of the teachers, in part implemented through evaluation and marks; family strategies concerning school choice and the practical results that these choices may have on class composition and interaction. All these aspects will be analysed from both the institutional (as for instance the case of regulation

versus free school selection) and micro perspective, paying particular attention to their local manifestations. In particular, the relevant issues to be analysed are the interconnections between the multiple rationales of the system and the specific practices and behaviours of the actors involved.

In order to do so, it is important to use specific concepts. In the particular case of education, as with various aspects, such as the labour market, family, neighbourhood and social relations of young people living in this specific institutional and local context, we will focus on the concepts of experience and trajectory.

As Dubet and Martucelli (1996) point out, the concept of 'school experience' (*expérience scolaire*) is very much related with the social situation of young people and the pressures to which they are subject, forcing them to face realities that might have been unknown to them before. This is true, for example of young people from lower social class backgrounds, who have to cope with the rules and values of school, very often in contrast with the most common values of these types of households.

Going back to the relationship which concerns social structures and individual strategies, as we will see in the pursuit of the analysis, we do not mean that this population is completely excluded. Indeed, we recognize that they implement particular strategies and behaviours to respond to constraints and objective difficulties they come up against, with results that are at least uncertain.

In the perspective of the direct experience of young people at school, as also in the case of some other approaches focusing more, for example, on parental strategies, there is a constant relation between the individual action and the structure within which this action is framed.

It is therefore extremely important to study this interaction with different levels of analysis. However, as it has been observed by some scholars (Isambert-Jamati 1990), even if peculiar behaviours are observed at the micro local level, in the end we should necessarily take into consideration the wider sociological and institutional reference, in which the local level is embedded.

These two perspectives, the macro and micro level, should be unified, since the latter represents a particular manifestation of macro phenomena. In fact, observation of the same phenomenon might lead to different interpretations depending on the level of analysis, the different role of determinants in various contexts and level of constraints or freedom for the actors involved.

This is why this article, dealing with the role of education, presents this double level of analysis: the macro institutional and the local level.

Therefore, the following sections will aim at showing how the interaction between actors, policies, institutions and structural constraints occurs at the local level and which specific mechanisms are implemented in the reproduction of social inequalities affecting school and education.

Each individual develops indeed his/her subjectivity on the basis of perceptions and social interactions (between peers, teachers and students, etc.) taking form in a specific context and place, which offers different opportunities of access to educational, cultural and social resources.

Thus, it emerges quite clearly how educational experience, like some other types of experience (working, family and relational), can prove more difficult or easy depending at the same time on the family background, residence and type of school.

Policies and status of educational segregation in France

When tackling the relationship between segregation and education in France, one of the first and most important concepts to deal with is the “*carte scolaire*”, an institutional tool established in 1963 with the aim of providing all children with equal access to school according to their abilities.

Originally the «*carte scolaire*» was a national policy aiming at rationalizing the different institutes at the local level. As far as secondary education is concerned, the main objective was a response to the needs of the national economy. At the same time the effect has also been regulation of school flows and their classification in different sectors (Charlot, 1994). In order to avoid disparities between different schools, this policy created a sort of rule associating students with their place of residence through “*sectorisation*”.

In specific contexts, this tool is therefore able to determine the structure of attendance of each school, from the social point of view, on the basis of the resident population.

This element of the “*sectorisation*” which was originally just one aspect of the “*carte scolaire*” assumed great importance, becoming to a certain extent the main focus of this policy.

In the academic and political debate, the “*carte scolaire*” has been much discussed and analysed from many perspectives. Some scholars have shown how this policy also created negative outcomes such as the schooling strategies implemented deliberately by middle class families and a great concurrence among different schools, all elements aggravating educational segregation.

Moving on from these assumptions, as from the nineties the Ministry of Education tried to re-focus the “*carte scolaire*” on the paradigm of “*mixité sociale*”. Recent studies recognized that its administration has proved debatable, also producing results opposite to those intended (Laforgue, 2005).

In general, we may define two main positions: those willing to abolish “*carte scolaire*” and pushing for a free choice of families and stronger competitiveness among schools to attract students, and

those who are on the contrary convinced of the increasingly serious territorial inequalities in urban contexts.

A relatively recent study conducted by the *Rectorat de Paris* (2005) has helped to identify some typical mechanisms of the “*sectorisation*”, as well as the choices and strategies implemented by families.

The eight percent of the households living in a neighbourhood classified as “*urbain défavorisé*” are able to bypass the “*carte scolaire*” through a derogation allowing them to send their children to a lower secondary school situated in a better neighbourhood classified as “*urbain favorisé*”.

This study identified several criteria and mechanisms through which the schooling strategies take place. The first concerns the image of the school, seeking to extend the educational supply by diversifying classes and proposing different curricula (section *Latiniste, Cham*⁶, *Européenne*). However, as we will see, educational segregation does not simply concern the relationship between different schools but can also concern classes in the same institute due to the existence of specialized classes, creating as a consequence a social stratification on the basis of social capital and background.

The second element has to do with the safety and security of students (Bacconier, Marguerite, Geoffroy 2008) while the third concerns the stability and turnover of teachers.

In short, , these are all criteria that families look to when choosing a school. Indeed, should these requirements not be completely satisfied they may implement practices of “*évitement scolaire*”⁷.

Recently, in order to respond to this phenomenon of schooling, which seems to be very widespread in particular in Paris and its surroundings, the national government has tried to redefine the “*carte scolaire*”, promoting the above-mentioned objective of social mix.

As from 2007 parents can send their children to schools out of their own sector, if the chosen institute is able to accept students other than those assigned on the basis of the residence.

However, some priority criteria are set and concern: students with disabilities; students with scholarships based on merit; students responding to certain social criteria; children who need serious medical care delivered close to the school requested; students requiring a particular educational programme; students whose brothers and sister attend the same school; and students living close to the sector border.

Considering some statements of the Ministry at the time, it seems that the national authorities are not so much concerned with the real problem of educational segregation as with increasing

⁶ A specific curriculum at lower secondary school, proposing art and music alongside the regular school subjects.

⁷ A practice of avoidance concerning school.

educational options and freedom for families. (Communication en conseil des ministres, 25/7/2007; Bacconier, Marguerite, Geoffroy 2008).

Norberto Bottani (2007), an expert on European educational systems, explains this from an electoral point of view, judging these measures as political strategies to gain credit among middle class households, probably a strategic political target for the right-wing government.

However, on the evidence of references in the literature, most scholars agree that not all students will be able to benefit from deregulation (Duru-Bellat and Van Zanten 2006).

In fact, the gap between lower and upper social class students could remain the same, if not even greater. For instance, a previous study conducted in Lille by Barthou and Monfroy (2004) already registered a fairly marked social division and polarization among different lower secondary schools in the city, following a sort of social hierarchy, associated with educational choices and perceptions of households. Moreover, these authors note the importance of always bearing in mind urban dynamics, which are interconnected with educational policies and administration of schools.

Similarly, Oberti (2007) in the research conducted in Hauts-de-Seine, shows how in the same context there may be co-existence of excellent schools with others more typical of a “*banlieue populaire*”. The same thing happens in Montreuil.

It is worth noting that schooling and family strategies towards education are not the same in every context. In fact, as shown by this French scholar, they can vary at the local level from one context to another, even if these places are spatially close – a fact reminding us once again of the existence of different urban dynamics.

In particular, Oberti shows how some schools in working class neighbourhoods may concentrate a number of students with a similar disadvantaged profile and also shows how the educational supply can bring about a hierarchy among schools (Oberti 2007 p.21).

In the same way, Korsu (2004) analyses some mechanisms of competitiveness among schools, such as the development of policies and programmes to attract students showing good educational results and good social backgrounds. Clearly, in this perspective the function of schools becomes something more than the simple transmission of skills and knowledge, being more a complex and stratified system.

To conclude this section, on the evidence of the literature it emerges that most scholars agree on judging the “*carte scolaire*” as a quite inadequate tool in order to fight educational segregation. At the same time, simple changes such as those proposed by the government cannot serve as a solution for educational inequalities (Bacconier, Marguerite, Geoffroy 2008).

In the same direction, Lagrange and Oberti (2006) believe that a redefinition of the «carte scolaire» should be more connected with urban policies in general, in order to perform direct actions on the resident population in accordance with other policies such as housing. A similar multidimensional approach is on the other hand called for by those scholars working on residential and housing policies, such as Donzelot (2004), who considers it important to involve not only some residential aspects but also other elements of the urban space, such as schools and education.

In this perspective the challenges of segregation in general, and in particular in education, consist in a direct involvement and constant update of the actors: households, but also institutional actors such as schools (teachers and management) and politicians, both at a national and local level.

School between aspirations and constraints

As we noted extensively, school acts on a double level: the institutional one and a more communitarian dimension involving the family together with other local actors (Henriot and Van Zanten 1991). What is important in our perspective is the interaction existing between school as an institution and families, in particular those with low economic and social capital.

Some significant differences from the 60s and 70s have now emerged in France concerning the degree of complexity and conflict obtaining at school as an institutional and physical place. Before the extension of the “democratization process”, higher education involved only a minority of the working class – a sort of elite representing those who managed to “sort it out”, having gone through a process of upward mobility. This group, possibly because it was only a minority and a little bit more homogeneous from the ethnic point of view than today - although in France it already concerned second generations of citizens of Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Maghreb origin - was more easily integrated. They apparently absorbed better the values, rules, behaviours, language, ways of speaking and dress in use at school. In a few words, they seemed to be more aligned with the values promoted by school.

As we mentioned, these students represented the elite and were, in a sense, chosen by the educational system through a kind of selection, which was in part based on educational results but also on their adaptation to these social values promoted by schools and teachers. Also, as shown by Jackson and Marsden (1962) in the British context, an important role was also played by these lower social class households implementing specific strategies such as: exemption from housework (especially for girls), purchase of books and encyclopaedias in order to stimulate their children intellectually and guarantee them some tools and support, use of local relations and social capital,

and use of professional, personal and associative networks.

Today, school integration seems to be more complicated, although education is more extended in terms of volume. However, this does not mean that most households no longer implement such strategies at a micro level and are totally uninterested in the educational careers of their children. Therefore, it is necessary to bear in mind that the lack of integration and educational failure is not entirely a matter of households' responsibilities, as some people may argue⁸ but also of specific institutional mechanisms combined with local and territorial factors, such as the schooling practices deliberately implemented by middle class families and the consequent segregation at school. Of course, what counts are also the personal characteristics (please see the third section of this article), the real interest and motivation of the individuals involved, which are elements very often neglected, also because somewhat difficult to estimate and taken into account.

As we found with our empirical research conducted through in-depth interviews with young people and their families, parents often try to oppose their children's decisions to stop attending school and try to "impose" them an education and even when they are out of the educational system they try to respect the role of institutions, which means they perceive their importance and are not totally alien to them.

“Quand ma fille n’a pas voulu continuer au lycée elle avait 16 ans. Elle avait le droit de partir mais je suis quand même allée à l’académie à expliquer pourquoi elle, une fille de 16 ans allait pas au lycée. Comme j’ai dit elle pouvait partir mais quoi même ils se posent des questions et moi je voulais les informer. L’école avec elle c’était un conflit tous les jours, pour des longues périodes elle n’est pas allée et alors à un certain moment je me suis dit, bien on arrête tout et on fait notre propre école. C’était décision était contre tout le monde que disait qu’on était folles.. son père par exemple. On avait réfléchi ce que faire... On avait pensé d’étudier dans une école à Londres pour étrangers chez sa tante à Londres. J’ai même conseillé à l’académie qu’elle fasse un compte rendu des activités mais elle l’a jamais fait. C’était pour lui donner une structure, un cadre de règles mais déjà elle n’aime pas écrire. (Jeanne a fifty five years old divorced single mother living in Montreuil).

Sometimes families make efforts not only at the economic level but also concerning, for example, transportation to school, especially considering the characteristics of the area of residence. In the cité Leo Lagrange, considered to be one of the most degraded places of the “*Haut Montreuil*”, Halima from Morocco, a 52-year-old divorced single mother of two girls and a boy, recipient of

⁸ In France, for example, during summer 2010, on the occasion of some violent demonstrations in Saint San Denis, President Sarkozy proposed eliminating in some cases the grants (bourses scolaires) received by households for each child going to school, independently of any merit: a measure which might be considered as going in the direction of over-responsibility for families.

RSA⁹ - Revenu de Solidarité Active" (revenue of active solidarity) – explains how she is committed to the education of her children and how despite evident lack of economic and social capital, she manages to implement some useful strategies:

« Je m'occupe beaucoup de l'école de mes enfants, même si j'ai pas trop fait d'études et je parle pas parfaitement la langue française. Quand ils étaient plus petits en cas de problème je les envoyais à l'aide aux devoirs organisé par plusieurs associations dans le quartier (...). Pour le choix du lycée on a choisi l'école avec la réussite la plus élevée. e ». (Halima)

As stated by many scholars, the existence of effects connected to the neighbourhood of residence and social relations on the basis of parental and family mobilization seems to be true for both immigrant and non-immigrant students. A somewhat old but interesting study conducted in France on a national sample of about a hundred students of Algerian origin who had gone through a successful educational career, shows how the residential mobility of parents matters, together with the characteristics of the place of residence (Santelli, 2001). Many of them managed to avoid the neighbourhood through some strategies implemented by their families, such as the choice of alternative schools outside very segregated neighbourhoods, and residential mobility.

The study also pointed out how the fact of moving to a less homogeneous and more differentiated area of residence brought them into contact, for example, with French people: a fact which favoured the use of the French language and spread among immigrant families some of the values like those predominating at school.

Unlike these situations, especially some specific areas of our neighbourhood are quite homogeneous from the socio-economic point of view, although as we already stated a certain social mix is not completely lacking. Despite a situation of "semi-concentration", through a positive peer and role model effect neighbours can sometimes be an example for school and work and may be a source of information for those young people coming from households with low social and economic capital, in particular if they do not have older brothers or sisters, whose role for educational attainment is highly recognised in the international literature.

⁹ Introduced by the High Commissioner for workers' solidarity, Martin Hirsch, the RSA had from the beginning the objective to benefit 3 million people, compared to 1.2 million of its RMI predecessor. The new programme's goal is to assist not only the unemployed but also the "working poor", including those who find a job but have an income lower than if they had remained on unemployment. The standard RMI amount of 454 euro for an unmarried jobless individual will not change. But working individuals earning less than 880 euro a month can receive additional help by applying to the national fund for family allowances (Caisse Nationale d'Allocations Familiales). They will receive additional funds which are reduced as their wages increase. Unlike the RMI, the RSA, which Hirsch says was designed as a "shield" for the poor and those with modest means, will allow an employed individual to combine income and government allowances for an indefinite period.

As Julien told us, his school choice at high school, with a range of different options but limited to “Bac Pro”¹⁰, was made on the basis of what a friend of his, living in the same building, chose the previous year: *«J’avais plusieurs choix, comptabilité, vente mais j’ai choisi électro plastique parce que un pot à moi, qui a après arrêté, avait commencé cette école. Moi après j’ai choisi ça parce que je me suis aussi renseigné et j’ai vu la possibilité d’un bon salaire.* (Julien twenty three years old, Haitian origin and a *Bac professionnel* in electro plastic).

A similar case with probably a more positive result is the one of Mohammed, a 29-year-old man working as manager in a bank:

«Avec ma famille on a toujours habité dans ce quartier à Montreuil et dans cette maison. Moi, j’ai été le plus âgé de mes frères et sœurs et j’ai été le premier à aller au Lycée. J’ai fait le général. Chez nous avec mes parents on savait pas trop mais j’ai décidé d’aller au Lycée parce qu’il avait quelqu’un dans cette immeuble qui l’a fréquenté. Après il a déménagé mais je crois il a aussi bien réussi. Après pour mes frères et sœurs c’était beaucoup plus simple, parce que j’ai été la toujours pour les aider. Ma petite sœur par exemple l’année prochaine veut étudier médecine ».

Therefore, we could say that the neighbourhood may also work through a positive peer effect as an influence for school choices and ambitions, spreading among families certain socio-educational practices driving in the direction of educational success. However, the problem lies most probably in the number of these positive models.

With regard to the significant relationship between poverty, aspirations and educational attainment, an interesting approach is offered by those authors proposing reconsideration of the concept of culture in the approach to poverty. These “new cultural” approaches to the study of poverty consider culture as an element providing the means for action. Unlike the “old” approach (Lewis, 1959) in this new direction the connotation of the term culture has changed significantly. Today the idea of culture simply as values or ideals is mainly rejected to give way to other conceptions of culture such as “toolkit” or “repertoire” (Swidler 1986, 2001; Lamont and Small 2008) or, more in general, culture is defined as a “complex rule-like structures that constitute resources that can be put to strategic use” (DiMaggio 1997, p. 265). It is described as a vocabulary that people can mobilize to make sense of their practices and conducts (Lamont 1992; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) or skills allowing the subject to do something (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 1990; Swidler 2008). Bourdieu has delved deep in the study of education, culture and their connections, and his work (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977/1990) offers extremely important reference in this field. However, the well-known notion of “cultural capital” is considered more as a resource than a motivation, while it is the concept of “*habitus*” that is more closely related to the model of cultural internalization and

¹⁰ Baccalauréat Professionnel

may therefore be particularly relevant for focusing on motives (Dumais 2002; Vaisey 2010). In this direction Lizardo (2004, p. 394) defines the “*habitus*” a “cognitive-motivational system shaping perception and choice”.

Bourdieu’s use of the term is not always consistent, since he does not define it solely in terms of conceptions of “what is possible” (Dumais 2002, p. 47) but sees it as involving both “motivations” and “subjective aspirations” at the same time (Bourdieu 1990, p. 54). However, since he affirms that the “*habitus*” is shaped by “experiences statistically common to members of the same class” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 60), we can, even if indirectly, assume that the socioeconomic status shapes the desires and expectations of people.

This model seems therefore to suggest that the poor will have lower socioeconomic aspirations than their richer peers and that these aspirations will have implications for evaluation and action, serving to reproduce their social position (Bourdieu 1984). Similarly, Sanchez-Jankowski (2008) largely supports this idea in an ethnographic work on poor neighbourhoods in New York and Los Angeles, although he rejects the hypothesis that the “subculture of scarcity” in poor neighbourhoods is fixed and inevitably leads to social disorganization and misery.

On the contrary, this author states that living in such neighbourhoods “powerfully reinforces values that make life meaningful within the particular structural conditions of poverty, though at the expense of values found in the larger society that would improve a person’s chances for obtaining and maintaining socioeconomic mobility” (Sanchez-Jankowski p. 348). In stating this, avoiding interpretation of the traditional “culture of poverty” approach, which to some extent tended to “blame the victims”, he recognizes that the aspirations of the poor and socially disadvantaged populations differ from those of the middle classes (Vaisey 2010). Young people coming from the middle-class usually live in a social context driving them to continue education, but most of the poor young people do not, or at least live and grow up in a situation where such transmission occurs less often or with greater costs for them and their families. “If poor youth—unlike their more advantaged peers—cannot simply ‘*go with the flow*’ and end up in college, their educational ideals might matter more for predicting their choices because they need to be motivated enough to overcome the surrounding social inertia. Perhaps more of their own efforts are necessary to get them into a position where going to college becomes a viable option” (Vaisey 2010 p.94).

Thus, following these authors we also recognize a sort of combination between educational ideals, cultural motives and, of course, structural elements such as a concrete economic and social capital deprivation, without at the same time pushing for an over responsibility and “blame of the victims” for their educational ideals that, as we have seen, result from different factors but are, at least in

part, also socially structured.

“The moral and political fear of blaming the poor and sociologists’ overreaction to the limits of earlier models of culture have prevented us from asking whether the cultural models and motives that the poor internalize might have an “exogenous explanatory power” that serves to inhibit socioeconomic success. If we leave aside unnecessary ideas about “dated” approaches to culture, we might find it unsurprising that those who grow up poor are—*on average*—different from the non poor in how they conceive of education and that these conceptions might—*on average*—motivate them to pursue life strategies that are locally adaptive but globally disadvantageous. Obviously, as critics of motivational models of culture have repeatedly emphasized, we will never find a cultural domain in which *all* poor youth differ from *all* non poor youth, nor one in which *all* poor youth converge on an identical way of seeing and evaluating the world. Nevertheless, different central tendencies in motives across groups probably play some role in creating different central tendencies in behaviour across groups. Finding such differences and evaluating their importance is ultimately an empirical concern, not an ideological one”. (Vaisey 2010 p. 95).

As we found in our interviews in Montreuil, these different aspirations, which we have sought to place in an attempt of theoretical framework, are not completely and indisputably accepted as a matter of fact by individuals. Very often they are perceived as “imposed” and not really chosen, and so do not remain without consequence. On the contrary, they have an influence on the development of the person concerned, both as a student and as an individual. They are very often accompanied with a feeling of inadequacy and disqualification which school sometimes risks aggravating in these situations.

Florien, a twenty-three-year-old man whose parents are originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, talks about his results and behaviour at school:

«Au college, je n`étais pas très bien. En effets j`ai été un élève assez dissipé. j`amusais la galerie... quand j`étais calme j`y arrivais bien... C`était un problème d`attention. Dans ma tête je me suis convaincu que je n`étais pas bien à l`école... C`était un peu moi, un peu les amis, fréquentations... Mais je crois que ce n`était pas vraiment les enseignants mais plutôt mon comportement». (Florien,

twenty-two years old, working as animator in a youth centre).

Even if the majority of the people we interviewed do not blame teachers altogether for their results or educational failures, some, in particular those still going to school and therefore probably more involved in the educational process, stress their difficult relations with teachers. In addition, these relations may even prove more complicated if alongside difference in social status and class, there is also an ethnic difference between students and teachers, as is quite often the case in Montreuil.

Louis, a 17-year-old student of the general branch (Général) at 'Lycée Jaune Jaurès', of Haitian origin and living with his mother and younger brother, remarked: *« A l'école tout se passe très bien, sauf que voila, c'est juste que avec les enseignants ... ils sont un peut chiens. Ils se comportent pas pareil. Il y en a qui sont bien mais d'autres ça se voit qu'ils s'en foutent, ils viennent pour faire quoi ? Ils font leur boulot mais ils viennent pas pour nous. Ça donne pas envie de parler avec eux, leur comportement, leur attitude »*

As clearly emerges from this observation, there are two subjects involved *ils* (they) and *nous* (us), apparently in opposition. This characterization, as has often been seen in our interviews, seems to be quite frequent with the distinction between us and them, meaning with the first-person plural all the young people of the neighborhood. However, in Montreuil this can also take on an ethnical characterization, even if it is often used both by immigrants and people of French origin. Similarly, Karima a 48-year-old single mother born in Algeria but with French citizenship, talking about the school experience of her 19-year-old son observes:

« Mon fils il a un bon niveau à l'école mais comme je suis une femme seule il a eu une grande carence au niveau du père. Ça s'est manifesté beaucoup pendant sa scolarité : un grand perturbateur de classe. Pas agressif et pas violent mais perturbateur. Il voulait faire le clown. Par exemple, c'est une semaine qu'il a été exclu pour deux jours de l'école. Il a répondu au prof mais le problème est plus global, l'école a beaucoup dégradé. Les enseignants aussi n'essaient pas de comprendre les élèves, ils mettent des étiquettes : 'c'est un cas social..' et stop » (Karima)

As often happens, an educational failure or a disciplinary measure can have even worse consequences on the educational results and self-esteem, with consequences in turn on aspirations and motivations.

Another element that can seriously affect the educational career of students is expulsion from schools, a measure which seems to be very much in use and quite institutionalized¹¹ in France and in particular in schools where educational failure is higher, such as those in our neighbourhood. For instance, nearly fifteen of the fifty people with whom we discussed in depth school and educational issues in Montreuil admitted having been expelled permanently from schools, sometimes even more than once.

« Le problème qu'on voit souvent est que quand un jeune a 18 ou 19 ans, sans formation, sans travail et avec grandes difficultés à le trouver est parce que il était rejeté plusieurs fois de l'école: une première, une deuxième et quelques fois aussi trois ou quatre fois. Le temps que la

¹¹ In accordance with a national law, in France, every school officially has a council of discipline - "conseil de discipline", composed by: school head, employees representatives, users representatives (students and parents). This organ is plenipotentiary and discusses all practical issues concerning school, its rules and applications, including the expulsion of students.

bureaucratie scolaire réagisse à l'exclusion (avec la proposition d'une autre école) laisse l'élève exclu sans scolarisation. Le fait d'être rejeté par les institutions républicaines lui fait intégrer une mauvaise image de soi même. Après ils disent : comme ils m'ont rejeté je vais montrer de ce que je suis capable, alors ils cassent une voiture, ils vont faire un vol, faire une bêtise en scooter pour essayer d'attirer le regard d'un adulte. On devient pas délinquants parce qu'on a les parents au SMIC¹² ou seulement parce qu'on a des modèles d'identification dans la famille.» (Social worker in the association "Rue et cités"¹³).

To avoid any misunderstanding of the significance and content of these experiences, we must point out that our aim as social scientists is not to provide justifications and excuses for the individual's action but to frame these actions in the wider social context. However, if we do not mean to victimise the subject, at the same time, as we stated above, we also try to avoid blaming the victim. In any case, it seems that young people themselves, especially the younger amongst them, are quite aware of their "responsibilities" and of the consequences their actions and behaviours can have; indeed, they may even exaggerate, projecting an image of themselves as rational actors, totally aware of the consequences, which does not always correspond to reality.

« Dans ma classe au collège on était tous dans la même manière. Les autres parents faisaient un peu prêt le travail de ma mère. Il n'y avait pas des gens riches mais ça ce n'est pas un problème C'est pas parce-que mes parents on fait tel ou tel métier que je dois faire le même. On peut réussir. Il faut vouloir c'est tout» (Louis 17 years old).

Therefore young people and – even those with socially disadvantaged profiles, living in more or less segregated neighbourhoods – tend not to perceive themselves as victims of the school system. However, this feeling of being "out of place" at school brings us back to the points made above about the relationship between aspirations, education and poverty. Very often these young people, especially those with immigrant origins, come from households that had not fully assimilated the culture and rules of school, perceiving work as the main objective.

«À l'école supérieure j'étais plus sérieux qu'au collège, parce-que j'ai commencé à travailler aussi... J'avais déjà de l'expérience avec mon père. J'ai eu de la chance que mon père faisait le même travail et donc j'avais déjà travaillé au black les weekend... ». (Kadir)

However, it must be pointed out that even when aspirations are relatively "low", this does not mean

¹² **Salaire minimum interprofessionnel garanti**

¹³ The association aims at child and youth protection (12 – 20 years old), prevention from exclusion, and support for professional integration. Specialized in prevention, educators are constantly present in several districts of Montreuil, Bagnolet Noisy-le-Sec. Their approach and philosophy is to work directly in the streets of the neighborhood and in those places most frequented by this typology of young people.

that they are always easy to achieve. For example, unlike Kadir, who easily found an employer for his *alternance* (school/work contract) because of the experience he had acquired working with his father, Matthieu a 19-year-old boy of French origin, living in the *cité de l'Amitié* says: « *Je voulais faire de la plomberie mais je n'étais pas ai pas accepté et donc j'ai laissé tomber. J'étais démoralisé...c'est un grand mot mais j'ai été un peu saoulé* » (Matthieu 19 years old).

School class and educational results

Educational experiences can vary greatly. Depending on the school they attended, students are likely to have had different experiences and their educational attainment can vary significantly in quality and performance. Often these disparities are between schools but also between classes in the same school, changing from teacher to teacher, from context to context, etc.

School institutions generally claim that the distribution of students is casual. However, especially for France but the same could be said for other European countries, there is evidence contradicting this statement. Recent studies have shown that in most schools there are classes differentiated on the basis of the students' level and performance and so there are good and bad classes (Giry-Coissart and Niel 1997; Duru-Bellat and Mingat 1997).

In this perspective we can even better frame the already mentioned schooling strategies of middle class parents. This situation creates a sort of competitiveness between schools in “bad neighbourhoods” and peripheral areas, trying to attract “good students” and, even more, young people considered as “good family students”, in order to keep the class level up to a certain standard, from the educational but also the social point of view. In general, grouping students of the same level in homogeneous classes has no systematic effect on educational progress, although the ways groups are formed contributes to widening the gaps between the students with the best progress in the best classes and the worst in the worst classes (Duru-Bellat and Van Zanten 2006).

This differentiation may come about through different mechanisms (Pallas et al., 1994). First of all teachers, control and decide which should be the contents and how to use them. Proposing the “adequate” level of difficulty for the class, teachers conform to this type of silent principle, dividing students by level. In this way, depending on the target and typology of students,

they also adapt their teaching methods. For example, for a class with a weak average level, teachers usually attribute more importance to oral exams and generally try to focus more on commitment and motivation than on the concrete result in itself. In this way, the attitudes and behaviours of students are heavily conditioned and the initial differences increase yet more. As far as the pedagogic strategies implemented by teachers in difficult educational contexts are concerned, importance seems to be attributed to their requirements in terms of workload. In fact, if the class is 'difficult' this may in some cases significantly lower the syllabus levels, as well as the preparation and average level of the students.

Another aspect which is very common among the people we interviewed in Montreuil attending the low secondary schools is the fact of not having obtained the *Brevet de Collège*, a diploma issued at the end of lower secondary school. In these dynamics we can identify a sort of mechanism taking place at school – a significant negative peer effect which parents sometimes recognise only later on, having seen the final result and reviewed the educational career. However, although we can identify an effect and certain precise mechanisms at work in school and education, it is very difficult from both the qualitative and quantitative point of view to estimate the pure effect of place and context, without mixing in at the same time any element pertaining to the personal characteristics of the individual or household.

Going back to the teachers' role, we should say that the turnover and the perceived quality of teachers are two other problematic issues in these kinds of local contexts, although the teachers' quality can be a subjective variable, depending on individual experience. *« Ils ont peur de la violence mais moi, je l'ai dit aux enseignants de mon fils. Par exemple il y a beaucoup de profs qui ne veulent pas enseigner dans tel ou tel établissement parce qu'ils ont peur de la violence, alors ils emmènent des enseignants très jeunes, avec pas beaucoup d'expérience. Toujours un nouveau prof dans le milieu de l'année avec des conséquences aussi sur le programme et sur le fait que les étudiants agissent comme perturbateurs. Mais ça s'est un problème général pas seulement de Montreuil »* (Karima a forty-eight-year-old single mother). Another major problem, in part connected to the teachers' role and arising in particular in lower level classes lies in perturbation during classes and an average low level of attention, which varies during the day and over the year (Eder and Felmlee, 1983). The element of violence and perturbation is an important dimension to bear in mind when analysing the atmosphere obtaining in an educational environment, in particular in peripheral areas. In general, it seems to be more evident in contexts with a particularly socially disadvantaged profile.

In order to attempt an explanation of the violent phenomena that may occur at school, we should

consider most of the issues and variables we have addressed in this section, and which seem to be more present in peripheral schools and are in particular: teachers mobility and turnover – an element which is often underestimated in the educational process and cannot be simply limited to the didactic; the lack of precise regulations concerning violence (except the easy and very often used instrument of expulsion); educational segregation and the socially homogeneous profile of some schools.

A specific form of violence that seems to have grown rife in many schools in peripheral neighbourhoods throughout Europe, and also in our study neighbourhood is bullying¹⁴. The first studies on this phenomenon were conducted in Great Britain and Scandinavian countries during the eighties, while in France it is a relatively new research topic, which has been mainly approach in terms of psychology, pedagogy and only to a lesser extent of sociology of education. It has emerged from researches that this is a particularly male phenomenon, whose cause can be found in both family and school socialization (Peignard et al. 1998). Although it is a general phenomenon, it seems to have a connection with the concentration of students having a particularly disadvantaged profile and experiencing educational failure. In particular in France, including our neighbourhood case, students of immigrant origin seem to be over-represented among those showing deviant behaviours, an element setting once more a difference between their socialization and those of their teachers and underlining the ambivalence of their identity (Duru-Bellat and Van Zanten 2006 p. 87).

To conclude this section, while a low school class level can have a negative influence on the educational outcomes of students, since they do not provide them with the necessary education, at the same time high levels can also entail risks, especially in peripheral and working class areas. In this way, also within high level classes there are mechanisms of sharp differentiation between those, possibly a majority, who are able to follow the demanding educational pace and requirements, and those who lag behind.

These students very soon cease to pursue the same objectives as their classmates, with two possibilities: either they implement ‘defence’ mechanisms, such as a disturbing behaviour in the class, interfering, as we have extensively noted, with the continuation of educational activities with all the negative consequences for the students. Otherwise, they simply remain excluded, assuming a

¹⁴ Bullying is a form of abuse. It involves repeated acts over time attempting to create or enforce one person's (or group's) power over another person (or group) , thus an "imbalance of power". The "imbalance of power" may be social power and/or physical power. The victim of bullying is sometimes referred to as a target. Bullying types of behavior are often rooted in a would-be bully's inability to empathize with those whom he or she would target.

passive attitude towards the class and education in general, with serious consequences for the pursuit of their educational career.

Of course this is a model and some of the complexity of social realities may escape but, in the light of the literature and our empirical evidence, this view could be generally be confirmed. As British research has shown, these risks seem to be lower if the level differentiation attains simply specific activities and options, such as a second or third foreign language etc. However, France has institutionalized these classes for lower secondary school (collège). In particular, in peripheral schools such as those considered in our analysis, these classes represent a strategy to attract “good students” but, more than the quality of students itself, what counts seems to be the social background. The institutional aim is therefore an educational social mix, which is not fully achieved since these classes are quite homogeneous as far as the students’ educational performance and social background are concerned.

Orientation and school choice between institutional and local models

When talking about school dynamics, included at a local level, where we can directly observe all mechanisms, it is important to take into account a very decisive moment for each student: the one of orientation and school choice.

Taking first into consideration the institutional characteristics of the educational system, we should say that the French one presents a medium level of stratification.

Due to the reforms brought in the mid-seventies, lower secondary school careers have been unified in just one curriculum. A first differentiation comes in at low secondary school (collège). From the first year of collège (sixième) families can choose to send their children to classes with particular specializations: Latin, German, Cham,¹⁵ etc. However, these seem to be only apparent free choices, since they are socially structured. As demonstrated by Caillé (1996) for example: 26% of teachers’ children, enjoying of a relatively high social capital, a very useful element in education, choose German as a second language, against 8% of workers’ children.

In accordance with the literature we can say that all these options respond to concrete strategies of distinction implemented by middle class families, which are at the same time reproduced by the lower social classes.

Michelle Lamont recognizes this as a general tendency in French society, particularly evident in educational dynamics: “Tandis que les Français adeptes de l’exclusion culturelle marquent une très grande distance entre eux et le ‘français moyen’, les Américains ont tendance à puiser dans une

¹⁵ Programme d’enseignement des classes à horaires aménagés musicales (cham)

large gamme des répertoires culturels intégrant des éléments directement issus de la culture commune” (Lamont 1995, p. 126).

Of course educational choices concerning for example the option of an ancient language or music, such as in the case of *Cham* classes, might also correspond to tastes and aptitudes but in a way they clearly represent, first of all, a choice of orientation and not simple options.

In general, educational attainment seems to respond to a rationale, which is at the same time academic (progress follows good results) and social. However, the international literature and empirical evidence have shown that at one and the same academic level orientation choices differ appreciably depending on the social background.

Concerning the French orientation process, the general rule is that final decision emerges from an exchange between teachers and the family, being a sort of compromise between aspirations, wishes and the objective academic results. Families know quite well that choices depend on educational results and they normally adapt their options to the concrete skills of the child.

However, particularly in the case of students showing average academic performance, social background becomes quite a significant variable: “ Quand la situation est incertaine, les familles de milieu populaire, plus sensibles au risque d’échec dans les études à venir, se montrent plus prudentes que les familles de milieu aisé, et renoncent à demander les filières générales, plus valorisées, pour se ‘rabattre’ sur une formation professionnelle (sachant que ceci est moins vrai pour les familles étrangères¹⁶); à l’inverse, toujours pour les élèves un peu ‘justes’, seules les familles de milieu aisé ‘osent’ demander les orientations les plus valorisées. Or, ces demandes familiales sont fortement prises en compte par les conseils de classes qui, comme les textes les y invitent, ont tendance à les ‘suivre’; de fait, en suivant ainsi les demandes exprimées, mais aussi en ne ‘corrigeant’ pas à la hausse les demandes de ceux qui sont fortement auto-sélectionnés, les conseils entérinent les biais sociaux incorporés dans ces demandes (Duru-bellat, Van Zanten 2006 p. 45).

It is also recognized that in general teachers and orientation counsellors themselves, implicitly take into account social background as a main variable when ‘proposing’ an orientation. To resume, in the case of France, social inequalities which seem to exist already after primary school, even increase at low secondary school following specific mechanisms.

¹⁶ This is, for instance, what emerged from an important ethnographic study conducted during the nineties by Stéphane Beaud (2003) and resumed in a book entitled: “80% au bac et après?”. This research, which loomed large in the French debate on education, shows how in France, starting from the end of eighties-beginning of the nineties, immigrant origin households over-invested, sometimes independently of results, in educational processes for their children, driving them towards a ‘Bac de filière générale’.

The first one attains as we have observed acquisitions: educational success seem in part varying depending on the social origin. Secondly, the increase of inequality is due to the choice of classes and the orientation process taking the form described.

As far as high school is concerned, in France the system is particularly stratified and differentiated in the levels of competence provided to students and social background still retains a decisive role. For example, the presence of children of executives (*cadres*) is 33% in *Bacs généraux*, 14% in *Bacs technologiques* and 11% in *Bacs professionnels*. Social differences are also recorded in the different specializations (*séries*): executives' children represent 54% in *série scientifique*, 43% in *série économique* and *littéraire* and between 27% and 31% in *technologique* (Insee).

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

Another important aspect concerns gender differences. Girls have generally better results than boys at high school, with an average score diploma obtainment of 75.4% against the 62.9% of boys. However, they less often access the *série scientifique*, which is today considered the most prestigious specialization.

This aspect is also relevant to our analysis of the local context, since we generally observed more difficult trajectories and experiences among boys. Probably this also pertains to the local dimension and to the fact that lower social class male students are less easily controlled by their families and are in general more present in public spaces than girls, evident also in the case of Montreuil, with a consequence on school commitment, educational performance and results.

However, it is important to say that even if girls usually follow more regular educational paths, they are not exempted from the same mechanisms of future selection, based on local and social rationales, especially in the future steps of their academic careers, at high school but in particular at the access to the *grandes écoles*¹⁷ and the most prestigious universities. For instance, as is the case

¹⁷ The *grandes écoles* (literally in [French](#) "great schools") of [France](#) are higher education establishments outside the main framework of the French [university](#) system. The *grandes écoles* select students for admission based chiefly on national ranking in competitive written and oral exams. In contrast, French public universities have a legal obligation to accept all candidates of the region who hold a [baccalauréat](#). Usually candidates for the national exams have completed two years of dedicated preparatory classes, although this is not always the case. The *grandes écoles* do not have large student bodies (3,000 at the largest establishment; most have a few hundred students each year). They have traditionally produced many if not most of France's high-ranking civil servants, politicians and [executives](#), as well as many scientists, writers and philosophers. Other *grandes écoles* concentrate on a single subject area, such as [engineering](#), [sciences](#) or [business](#).

of Sabrina, a twenty-year-old girl of Algerian origin, problems may arise later on during continuation of the educational career:

«Je suis allée au Le Nan de Tillemon, un collège assez chaud mais là c'est bien passé. J'étais une des meilleures dans la classe mais le problème c'était plus tôt au lycée. Je suis allé en Bac L (Littéraire) mais la première année c'était trop dur. Heureusement je me suis engagée à fond et j'y suis arrivé. Mais après encore le problème et ressorti de que je suis allé à l'université. Déjà je voulais aller à la Sorbonne mais ils m'ont pas acceptée et ils m'ont orientée vers une autre. The characteristics of the family and social backgrounds can significantly influence the orientation processes. However, as with all mechanisms taking place locally, there are specific variables and dynamics which structure this phenomenon.

First of all, an important element concerns the lower secondary school attended since the previous educational experience not only influences the future educational attainment itself but also the orientation process.

At this point we will go deeper into the processes of orientation and choice of high school, seeing how these selections are made and what are the micro mechanisms and dynamics behind them.

In such particular educational and social contexts, school choice and orientation can be a decisive moment, having strong incidence on students' self-perception. In general young people have negative experiences and do not live this as a moment of real choice but more as something imposed. They generally experience a feeling of disqualification, being classified as low quality students to be sent to low quality schools with a certain loss of self-esteem, which can on the contrary often be the key towards motivation and positive educational results.

Matthieu for instance, talking about transition from lower to higher secondary school, says: *« Dans ce moment je cherche du travail. Je ne vais pas à l'école, je me suis arrêté en bac-pro à 18 ans. Au début J'ai fait le lycée général mais je me suis fait avoir... j'ai écouté les profs qui disaient: tu as les moyennes, tu peux aller en bac général. Moi j'étais un bon élève mais je n'aimais pas réviser. J'étais en bas tout le temps. C'est au lycée que j'ai compris et je suis allé en bac pro. Mais là aussi Je ne faisais pas les devoirs et je n'ai jamais reçu de diplôme. Je me suis arrêté à chaque fois. Je suis jamais arrivé jusqu'au bout de ce que je faisais. C'est un peu mon problème. »*

(Matthieu 19 years old).

As he clearly recognizes, in a quite cynical, bitter but concrete way, the fact of having progressively raised his educational aspirations, because of his potential recognized by teachers, has been negative not only for

his educational career but also for his professional and working future. Matthieu would have preferred a professional education in the field of construction but from a *BEP* in secretariat (*Brevet d'Etude Professionnel*) they tried to re-orientate him again in *Bac comptabilité*, without any success, since basically all these proposals were against his wishes.

In general, in the French context we find a problem with lower social class students if they have no clear ideas about their future, skills and desires, which is quite often the case. In particular if their family cannot provide real support in terms of orientation and social capital. This negative consequence of the orientation process might in part be a responsibility of schools and teachers, which often shows difficulties in the relationship with these students, in considering their abilities and providing them with positive stimulation. However, at the same time the institutionalized procedure, counts a lot. As observed above in the case of Matthieu, if students have a fair preparation, the general tendency is to set them directly in the direction of a *Bac Général*. Thus, quite often most of the students had not made any real choice. Either it is made by teachers and counsellors or casually, on the basis of the places and schools available, since especially those with a strong demand may have limited places available.

Once for instance, talking to a group of about ten young men between seventeen and twenty-five years old, all living in a couple of buildings in the same *cit *, I realized that almost half of them attended the same high school which was not even in the neighbourhood. Something which seems to be very often the case.

When some students, through the help and commitment of their families, try to escape these mechanisms, in no case it is as simple. Either they have to attend a private school, or they try to send their children from the outset to more elite schools, maybe in the capital. For instance, Anne, a French origin sixty-year-old woman, who used to work as a concierge in a social housing building, told us about her experience: « *Avec Marie, apr s le coll ge on voulait aller dans un grand Lyc e un peu  litaire dans un beau quartier de Paris, une meilleure  cole et l  j'ai senti la discrimination. Je me suis senti rejet e. C' tait rien   voir avec la couleur mais plus pour le fait qu'on venait de Montreuil. Ce jour-l  je me suis sentie compl tement d consid r e, ils m'ont regard  de haut. Elle  tait pas accept e, c' tait loin de  a a m'as marqu e...je n'ai m me pas parl  en famille mais  a m'as* *marqu e* ».

In this perspective, especially in the case of the orientation process, next to the high importance covered by the family and social background, we can still observe the existence of specific mechanisms of neighbourhood effects and spatial exclusion in which the local dimension has a determinant place influencing the individual education trajectory.

Of course, it is quite difficult to measure the pure effect of the neighbourhood but in any case we

believe having here outlined at least some evident processes and mechanisms taking place in education at the local level.

Conclusion

As we extensively noticed in this article, the relationship between segregation and inequality is a complex phenomenon; it is to be considered at various spatial levels and concerns different institutions and social practices.

When tackling the issue of segregation, as we observed school becomes a very decisive element counting more than others in the relationship between segregation and social inequalities.

As shown by the literature this is true in many contexts but it seems to be particularly true in the case of France, where school is at the centre of social inequalities and social relations more in general.

In the specific case of Montreuil we observed how different dynamics take place at a local context and concern the institutional frame, in particular the regulation of school fluxes through the “carte scolaire” but also more informal and local dynamics such as the educational choices of teachers, the strategies implemented by families (both of the low and middle social class) and local peer group effects, which can have a determinant influence on the school class level and individual performance of students.

Sometimes the role and importance of education on individual performances and trajectories, which concerns not simply the number of years - but also the quality of education (type of school attended, location, peer group and school social capital) seem to be at the same time often overemphasized by middle class families and neglected by households with the most disadvantage profiles.

Although, as we said, we should pay attention and avoid the risk of considering the most deprived households as complete estrange to school mentality and completely lacking of social capital. As we observed through our empirical evidence, even poor households are able to mobilize some forms of social capital at a local level, which is very useful for instance during school choice and orientation. However, we should certainly acknowledge that this social capital is often quantitatively and qualitatively lower than those available to the middle class.

As far as school and education success are concerned, much depends on the individual commitment and aspirations of the subjects involved but as we observed from a more theoretical point of view, we should not neglect that aspirations are often socially constructed, as it is for instance the case with the school orientation process.

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