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*Paolo Barabanti**

Author information

* Laboratory for Research and Intervention on Societies, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Brescia, Italy.
Email: paolo.barabanti@unicatt.it

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Inequalities in the Swiss School System

Paolo Barbanti*

[Review of the book: *Les inégalités scolaires en Suisse. École, société et politiques éducatives*, by G. Felouzis and G. Goastellec (Eds.), Peter Lang, Berne, 2015. ISBN: 9783034315920]

Sociology of education has always investigated inequalities in education as one of its main favoured focus. As a matter of fact, since the early studies by Coleman (Coleman *et al.*, 1966), Jencks (1979) in the USA and the ones by Bourdieu and Passeron (1964; 1970) and Bernstein (1975) in Europe, until the most recent research (Gallino, 1983; Schizzerotto, 1988; Boudon, 2000), inequalities in education strongly persist (Besozzi, 2017). It is a deeply debated issue because of its complexity: actually inequalities can take various forms, affected in their genesis and development by many determinants, and can occur in different contexts. Over the last decades, international standardized surveys (such as OECD's PISA and PIAAC but also IEA's TIMSS and PIRLS) have largely helped to explore the issue because they made the benchmark possible among diverse educational systems highlighting that the problem has got particular features and strong importance in some countries more than in others.

The book *Les inégalités scolaires en Suisse. École, société et politiques éducatives* fits properly this issue because, through the analysis of large surveys (such as OECD's PISA 2009), it aims to increase the understanding of phenomenon, looking at its significance and the factors which lead to inequalities in Switzerland. The book is composed of nine chapters, each one written by different sociologists of education. Each chapter is a different gateway to shed light on inequalities in the Swiss context but all contributions seek to show that the education success or the school failure do not only depend on ascribed and personal variables (for instance: sex, ethnic origin and family background) but also on group factors, including school policies and edu-

* Laboratory for Research and Intervention on Societies, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Brescia, Italy. Email: paolo.barabanti@unicatt.it

cational systems organizations, which create very different learning conditions such as to affect significantly students' destinies in terms of chances and advantages (or disadvantages).

Switzerland is a country where school inequalities play very much into students' achievement (Felouzis, 2015). Even though the existence of these inequalities is a common element in all Swiss cantons, students' school destiny varies widely from canton to canton and, consequently, inequalities may have a greater or less extent. This fact leads authors to consider that a portion of these inequalities are explained by the differences within each canton in terms of educational structures and systems (such as: age of school entrance and each school sector duration) and way by which students shall be allocated in different achievement layer group and in the secondary sector. That's the main evidence shown by Georges Felouzis in the first chapter, stressing OECD's PISA 2009 data, in which he makes a comparison about school inequalities among all 13 Swiss cantons from the perspective of less-advantaged students. As social inequalities do not have the same effect in all cantons, the author concludes that it is reasonable to consider Switzerland a real "workshop about school" and a breeding ground to understand the role of group factors as inequalities generator, useful also to study the same issue in other countries.

One of the most remarkable points noted on several occasions in many chapters of the book is the fact that a school system so differentiated and selective also in the compulsory education increases the social origin influence on the school achievement with the risk of an early school leaving especially for students with a low family background. The compulsory school organisation, therefore, can enhance disparities among students, leading to three problems – which could increase much more the inequalities: school segregation, students' stigmatisation and the resulting discrimination among them. In the second chapter, Samuel Charmillot explores the school segregation issue and its consequences for school training. He analyses the Geneva context showing that school segregation has a direct impact on inequalities in terms of learning and of future school choices: the early tracking system can increase the gap of competences between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Immigrant students are the group which mostly suffers from the negative tracking effects and from concentration in certain schools or classes. As a matter of fact, dividing younger pupils by ability can entrench disadvantage and several times they are separated on the indirect basis of their social and family background.

In addition to group factors, there are personal variables which may affect school choices, learning paths, and students' destinies, too. After a follow-up (in chapter 3 by Bruno Suchaut and chapter 4 by Géry Marcoux, Marion Dutrevis, and Marcel Crahay) about the differences in evaluation

and in the methods used to analyse learning inequalities between students' outcomes from OECD's PISA survey (focused on complex tasks and the use of knowledge in a challenging real situation) and cantonal tests (based on the traditional school curriculum), chapters from 5 to 8 are proposing analysis about different settings but with the same purpose to show that pupils' gender, social background and ethnic origin still strongly affect in the Swiss school system:

- In chapter 5 Irene Kriesi and Marlys Buchmann prove that the family cultural capital affects pupils' skills not only during the school career but even before school entrance. There are significant differences between boys and girls likely to undermine the quality of smooth transition to school: it's less hard for girls to adjust to "school life" and to achieve better than boys. According to the authors, there may be different reasons: in addition to psychological factors, such as male pupils' maturity delay (De Fruyt *et al.*, 2008), there are social factors, including the way kindergarten teachers prepare better female pupils rather than male ones to be a student in future (proposing calmer and more structured activities to girls and allowing boys to be noisier and ruder, for instance).
- In chapter 6 Christian Imdorf and Nicolette Seiterle study the case of discrimination in vocational training courses. In Switzerland vocational training courses are the most chosen sector among students (it includes around three fourth of young students), especially because of its dual system consisting of work-linked training. One of the most interesting findings is that the companies itself has got a key role to prevent discrimination, in particular toward immigrant students.
- In chapter 7 Thomas Meyer reiterates again the impact of an early school selection and an unequal geographical distribution of education programmes in influencing educational trajectories, especially for students with an immigrant background but also according to their gender or social origin. The author analyses a longitudinal data on students who took part in PISA 2000 and then, in the same year, they left compulsory schooling.
- In chapter 8 Gaële Goastellec and Crispin Girinshuti focus on the evolution of unequal access to higher education. They point out the persistence of educational inequalities, both on the basis of gender, ethnic origin and religious affiliation: there is still a strong link between parents' job and the opportunity to get a higher degree.

Even though the problem of inequalities in education has been a deeply discussed issue in the last decades and there have been several efforts in order to convert the assumption of educational opportunities democratization into real policies through national laws and European and international guidelines (Barone, Luijkx & Schizzerotto, 2010), the matter seems to be anything but resolved. Julie Falcon and Dominique Joye, in the final chapter of the book, deal with the issue of social mobility evolution over the last

fifty years. Starting with a detailed analysis of the existing state of the art, the authors reaffirm that there are still inequalities in education even if the educational system has highly expanded (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993); in addition, they emphasise the fact that with an early school selection the school policies will be less and less useful in order to remove the effects arising from different pupils' social origins (Pfeffer, 2008; Maurin, 2007). In Switzerland there's this same trends (Levy *et al.*, 1997; Bergman *et al.*, 2002; Falcon, 2012) and the rates about social mobility are almost constant over the years, with the exception of woman who have now more chances to reach a higher level of education than in the past.

To conclude, the book provides interesting reflections about the complexity of processes which generates educational inequalities, highlighting that it's quite impossible to reduce the causes to a narrow number of factors, whenever they come from. The book is undoubtedly of interest for social scientists and social policy experts, primarily because of the relevance of issues which permeates public debate, but also because it focuses on such a heterogeneous country, according to the specific school system in each canton. As in Switzerland each canton has got a particular school system which could differ, more or less, from the others (about, for instance, the duration of primary and secondary education or the school subjects taught), it would have been interesting in the first part of book a brief presentation of main differences among cantonal school systems, in order to better understand the following pictures. In addition, this book provides many general trends, made thanks to quantitative analysis of big data (especially from OECD's PISA survey) but it usually seems to disregard outliers, an important component when shading light on a particular social issue. This could be a good reason for supplementary useful research, which would be really focused on findings "against the odds".

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