Book review: The Dynamics of Social Outcomes of Education Systems, by J. G. Janmaat, M. Duru-Bellat, P. Méhaut, & A. Green (Palgrave, 2013)

*Alessandro Bergamaschi**

Authors information

*Unité de recherche «Migrations et Sociétés», Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis, France.

Contact authors' email addresses

*bergamaschi@unice.fr

The online version of this article can be found at

http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014_1_4.pdf

Article first published online

February 2014

Additional information of Italian Journal of Sociology of Education can be found at:

About IJSE

Editorial Board

Manuscript submission

J. G. Janmaat, M. Duru-Bellat, P. Méhaut, & A. Green
The Dynamics and Social Outcomes of Education Systems

Alessandro Bergamaschi[*]

The book by Jan Germen Janmaat, Marie Duru-Bellat, Philippe Méhaut and Andy Green might at first glance appear redundant. Why investigate the link between education and social cohesion when, as claimed by the authors themselves, a massive body of international literature argues that a good and high level of education improves civic awareness, reduces conflict and makes society more fluid? The sense of perplexity is also rooted in the fact that educational systems would be conforming to a pattern of common principles and procedures, with the goal of raising the level of education and improving the social trajectories of each individual.

It is therefore a subject of ambitious research that specifically seeks to challenge existing knowledge in the field of education. In particular, the pillar of the *knowledge-based economy*, namely that education is a key tool to enable countries to remain competitive in a context of strong globalisation. Appropriate educational credentials would permit both successful professional integration and an improvement in the quality of interpersonal relationships. However, the conclusions reached by the authors are an invitation to handle these widespread scientific and political postulates with due caution.

[*]Unité de recherche «Migrations et Sociétés», Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis, France. E-mail: bergamaschi@unice.fr

The study in question combines the sociological French and Anglo-Saxon traditions. Jan Germen Janmaat and Andy Green conduct research at the Institute of Education, London. The first is mainly concerned with the sociocultural outcomes of school systems, while the second mainly studies the link between education and socioeconomic development. In the Francophone context, Marie Duru-Bellat is the leading specialist in inequalities in the field of education. Philippe Méhaut focuses his work on the relationship between labour market and educational policies through a comparative approach.

According to the authors of this articulated collective book, today more than in the past, education is called into question as a remedy for excellence when it comes to find solutions to the social and economic difficulties that characterise this era. This is where Life Long Learning (LLL) becomes the guiding principle - the panacea - for addressing the problems of today. The main dependent variable of this study is social cohesion, that is to say, the level of "trust, sense of belonging and display of these feelings in concrete behaviour" (p. 267).

Their starting point is the following: school systems are interconnected with socio-political systems and the room for manoeuvre in educational matters may vary significantly from one country to another. For this reason, the comparative approach is relevant when the aim is to study the link between education and social cohesion. This approach also invites questioning about the progressive homogenisation of educational systems at the international level.

Another original point of this research - although it would be better to speak of "researches" because it concerns a complex work of coordination among several researchers as much empirical documentation - is the desire to merge quantitative and qualitative techniques. The former are necessary when the intention is to conduct comparative studies. The research team does not ignore the Comparative Political Economy (CPE) approach but it believes that in order to limit the effects of the excessive distance between observer and observed that characterises this school, it is necessary to enhance quantitative data with micro-sociological analysis. The study focuses on 26 European countries without neglecting appropriate comparisons - when data allow - with other contexts such as North America and Asia. The main databases used are the surveys of the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA), the World Values Study (WVS),

the Civic Education Study (CIVED) and the International Civics and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS).

The book has two main parts. Part I is concerned with shedding light on the differences and similarities in organisation among education systems and their respective outcomes. The following are the main conclusions.

The spread of private education and progressive school autonomy appear to be the dominant traits. However, this does not seem to result in a net decline in the public offer of investments, which are particularly vigorous in Northern Europe. Other differences concern, for example, the offering of VET, which is directly proportional to the strength of the respective welfare systems.

The organisation of teaching offer appears to diverge, especially with regard to the role of professional education and training. These are equipped with their own identity in the countries of southern Europe such as Italy and Romania, where there are marked dropout rates, while there is no difference among secondary school level supply chains in the Scandinavian countries, Belgium and the Netherlands; in these latter countries, the dropout rates are among the lowest in Europe. It is surprising that the authors make no mention of the French system, because of the strong presence of professional supply chain with a distinct identity; however, the school dropout rates in France are much lower than the rates in Italy and Romania (Bernard, 2011; Blaya, 2010).

Finally, is it possible to argue that the contents of teaching are gradually being standardised on the principles of democracy and individual autonomy, putting the emphasis on human rights, as is claimed by the theorists of the World Culture? The answer goes in the direction of heterogeneity rather than uniformity. There are still various countries where the education system is subject to strong public scrutiny, in particular France, and which emphasise the values of collectivism, in particular Italy.

Part II deals with the core of the issue that is the subject of this work: the relationship between education and social cohesion. The first contribution offers a reflection on the terminological transition from the concept of social integration to the concept of social cohesion. The first concept refers to functionalist sociology, in which the school ensures inter-generational transmission of the values and norms necessary for the proper functioning of social organisation. In this case, it is the school that integrates. The sociological meaning of social cohesion is based on

different premises: the school limits itself to forming individuals capable of "producing or creating social cohesion" (p. 157). In this second case, the agent of cohesion is the individual.

A direct effect of the spread of education is found at the level of pre-school education. In this case, the benefits emerge in both the short and the medium term. In fact, in countries where there are facilities for taking care of pre-school age children, mothers are more likely to resume work activities quickly, with an undeniably positive effect at the economic level. In addition, once they become adolescents, young people who have started their scholastic trajectory at a pre-school age show higher performance cognitive abilities with respect to "literacy attainment" (p. 178), thereby reducing inequalities in school.

The research team is a demonstration of foresight, stating that if comparisons between school systems are now widely used, studies on the relationship between school curricula and the scholastic attitudes of students are rare. Based on some indicators from the PISA 2009 survey, the authors arrive at this result. Less competitive attitudes, more oriented towards cooperation within the class, and more positive representations towards their future career are the preserve of young people inserted in schooling systems based on *total education* (Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Norway, Spain, Finland, India, Australia, Canada, Switzerland, New Zealand). *Total education* is characterised by close teacher-student relationships, a low level of authority, relative freedom for students when it comes to organising joint activities and non-hierarchical organisation of teaching. These elements encourage interpersonal exchanges and the emergence of confident institutional relations. The opposite model, defined by the authors as *academic education*, generates more competitive, less cooperative and more negative towards the school and more pessimistic views of the future.

The next step is to question the proposition that education improves civic attitudes (institutional trust, civic efficacy, intention to vote) and tolerance towards diversity (gender equality, ethnic tolerance). ICCS 2009 and CIVED 2000 datasets are used to examine these attitudes in the 13-14 year-old age group. The independent variables used are the level of school autonomy and comprehensivisation. The results are significantly counter-intuitive: the effects of type of education on these attitudes are very modest. The following are the reasons put forward. The provision of civic education

occupies a very small space regardless of the type of institution and educational system. In addition, the young age of the sample probably does not yet permit reflection on social and political issues such as inequality and the idea of citizenship. Finally, the study underline that those who frequent education successfully are easily led to believe that society is egalitarian while their most disadvantaged peers would have more antagonistic and asocial attitudes.

At the same time, it is clear that the countries where the professional teaching is not differentiated from the rest of the educational offer and where access to a university is relatively easy "have positive results on our indicators of cohesion" (p. 240) (attitudes towards minorities, participation, trust).

The result that perhaps is most worthy of attention concerns the hypothesis that education can exacerbate inequalities and weaken social cohesion. Using data from WVS 1999-2008, the authors find that in contexts where there is a good match between education and the labour market, the level of competition among individuals is high, regardless of the professional level of integration that characterises them. According to the authors, this is because "students and families have stronger interest in education widening inequalities in order to reap the attendant social and economic benefits" (pp. 245-246). In addition, when the correlation between education and the market is high, "it also increases the exclusion of those without qualifications and intensifies inter-individual competition" (p. 263).

The book ends with a focus on the culture of the young generations and the argument that the cosmopolitism is becoming the dominant attitude of this population. The databases are ICCS 2009 and CIVED 1999. The results show that the openness towards immigrant populations is tenuous, and the same consideration concerns views on gender issues. The thesis of the World Culture Theory thus seems to be characterised by some weaknesses.

This collective work allows us to reflect, first, on the limitations of the arguments that support the convergence of the organisation of educational systems. According to the authors, this occurs because there is an important difference between the speeches and the principles formulated at the supranational level and the socio-political dynamics that instead characterise the national level. From this it follows that "wholesale

convergence has not taken place and countries remain on key properties of their education system" (p. 302). Secondly, it is not possible to argue that education is the panacea for the lack of social cohesion that characterises this era. However, the comparisons made appear to suggest that fluid, less structured educational systems that facilitate access to a university, but also to VET training, are characterised by higher levels of cooperation than other systems. At the same time, starting training early, even at pre-school level, appears to increase school performance.

Thirdly, from the studies presented, it is clear that there is gradual shift towards an individualistic conception of social action, in both the scientific and political fields. The advance of the concept of social cohesion, whose focus is directed on the individual, with respect to that of integration, driven by a structural view, is important today in the field of sociology. At the same time, the emphasis on individuals, their resources and their capabilities, which characterises the policy choices of governments, is another element that emerges repeatedly in the course of the study.

However, the concept of social cohesion deserves to be defined in a more exhaustive manner. The authors adopt a macro-level perspective of cohesion, namely that it is a property of systems "and not simply the sum of its individual components" (p. 267). However, this structural view does not appear to be able to fully capture the elements that make up the condition of well-being that characterises the individual. In addition, it is surprising that efforts to define social cohesion, which is the main dependent variable of this study, do not appear in the early pages of the text; an attempt to define this concept is found only in the penultimate chapter.

Finally, it has worth reflecting on the choice of indicators used to measure the relationship between education and attitudes towards social and political themes, such as gender and immigration issues. The variables used by the research team, especially to test inter-group attitudes, are not able to detect changes that characterise the xenophobic ideology of recent decades. Studies by McConahay et al. (1981), Dovidio and Gaertner (1988), Meertens and Pettigrew (1997) which have helped to define *aversive racism* and *symbolic racism*, have shown for some time that training and education do not necessarily reduce inter-group intolerance. Xenophobia is clearly present also in the wealthier social classes but is expressed through different rhetorical, symbolic and, in particular, less

ostentatious formulas with respect to the situations of the less cultured and well-off social classes. In addition, with respect to the methodological choices made for this research, when the aim is to study the attitudes of a population that is at the beginning of adolescence, it is necessary to address mainly more qualitative indicators (e.g. visual stimuli, cartoons) and sociometric measures.

However, these concluding observations do not have the slightest intention of diminishing the work carried out in this research group, whose main merit is to have shown the viability of the national dimension, inviting us to reflect on the more usual assumptions in the field of education.

References

Bernard, P-Y. (2011). *Le décrochage scolaire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
Blaya, C. (2010). *Décrochages scolaires. L'école en difficulté*. Bruxelles: De Boeck.
Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L. (1998). On the Nature of Contemporary Prejudice. The Causes, Consequences, and Challenges of Aversive Racism. In J. L. Eberhadt & S. Fiske (Eds.), *Confronting Racism: the Problem and the Response* (pp. 1-51). London: Sage.
McConahay, J. B., Hardee, B. B., Batts, V. (1981). Has Racism Declined in America? It Depends on Who is Asking and What is Asked. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *25*(4), 563-579.
Meertens, R. W., Pettigrew, T. F. (1997). Is Subtle Prejudice Really Prejudice? *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, *61*(1), 54-71.