Money versus networks.
How upper-middle class groups compete for access to the best middle schools in the Parisian periphery

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SHORT SUMMARY – DO NOT QUOTE

Theoretical framework

This paper focuses on competition between upper-middle class groups for access to the ‘best’ middle schools in the Parisian periphery. It analyzes the impact of social class on school choice with specific attention to ‘vertical’ but also to ‘horizontal’ differences between class fractions according to the volume and nature of their cultural, economic, and social capitals. Following Bourdieu, but also other researchers that have adopted a Weberian perspective on differences between social groups (Bourdieu 1979, Bourdieu et al., 1980, Butler & Savage 1995, Lareau & McNamara 1999), capitals are defined as resources or assets accumulated over time from which material or symbolic profit can be derived either continuously or through intense “activation” and “re-conversion” at specific moments. The focus is also from a Weberian perspective on the way capitals are used to establish boundaries between social groups, for purposes of exclusionary social closure, that is for closing off opportunities for groups located at similar or inferior class positions perceived as actual or potential competitors. The concept of closure refers to the processual features of class, and tries to capture the elements of flux and ambiguity in class formation (Parkin 1974, Murphy 1988, Lamont 1992).
The paper argues that not only are educational credentials central to boundary work and to the recreation of social advantage (Collins 1979), but that other educational dimensions and more specifically school choice has become a key closure strategy. The rising importance of school choice is linked to social and educational changes that have reduced the impact of previous institutional barriers limiting access to secondary schools such as highly compartmentalized and selective academic school tracks, while increasing the number of competitors for a limited number of places in prestigious higher education institutions and in prestigious occupations and social positions. Choice is seen as an individual strategy oriented towards three major goals. The first is that of allowing upper middle class parents to secure for their children access to schools that provide safer routes to prestigious higher institutions and jobs because they provide higher educational quality, but also disguised forms of ‘chartering’ and ‘sponsoring’ (Meyer 1980, Turner 1980). The second is that of allowing upper-middle class parents to close off these same opportunities to other social groups that do not have the resources necessary to be able to make effective choices. The third is that of enabling different upper-middle class fractions to compete with each other by activating the resources that they have accumulated and are more familiar with. The paper will focus on this third dimension while also referring to the other two.

The research on which the paper is based adopts a comprehensive view of choice by taking into account both exit and voice strategies (Hirschman 1970). This perspective is uncommon in the literature on school choice but provides a better understanding of the links between parents’ capitals and the options that they explore and favor in their educational strategies. It leads to the consideration of four types of choices (residential choices, choice of a private school, choice of a non-local public school, voice in the local school). From a sociological perspective, choice is seen as influenced, in different ways at
different institutional levels (primary, middle secondary school, high school, higher education), by a combination of individual determinants (aims, values, beliefs & resources) and of ‘local configurations’ (Bagguley et al. 1990) (social and ethnic composition of the local population, housing and school markets, local urban and school policies). Finally, choice is also seen as a ‘matching’ process involving action towards schools and children and short-term as well as long-term strategies.

Methodology

The paper is based on two successive qualitative research studies conducted between 2000 and 2007, with funding from two different national research programs and with the collaboration of master and doctoral students. These studies were conducted in four communities in the Parisian periphery. Two of them are predominantly middle-class and comprise both public and private schools that enjoy a good reputation. The other two are characterized by social and ethnic mix and by a hierarchical school market comprising only or mainly public schools. Fieldwork included interviews with a large number (167) of families (137 mothers, 12 fathers, 18 couples), as well as with teachers, headteachers and local educational and political authorities. It also entailed the analysis of qualitative and statistical data on schools, on housing and on local policies. Some observations were also made of neighborhoods and school premises, of conversations between parents while waiting for their children to get out of primary schools and of parents’ associations and local educational authorities’ meetings. We also visited several real estate agencies pretending to buy a house or an apartment and asking questions about the schools.
The group of parents interviewed included a large proportion of upper-middle class parents (108), a less important proportion of intermediate middle-class parents (39) and a smaller proportion of lower-class parents (20). Four social fractions were later distinguished by taking into account the volume and type of parents’ economic and cultural capital as well as work sector. The two first categories that are the focus of the paper are also inspired by the work of Gouldner (1970) on the ‘new middle class’. The first is that of ‘technocrats’ (70). It includes managers working in the private sector, engineers, professionals in the private sector and firm owners. These families have a high volume of economic capital. They tend to live in middle-class communities and own the houses or apartments where they live. The fathers’ cultural capital is also high and ‘power-oriented’. It has been acquired for a large proportion of them in the French ‘grandes écoles’ as opposed to universities and is applied to managerial and, to a lesser extent, to high-level technical tasks. A majority of these parents work in the private sector.

The second category is that of ‘intellectuals’. It includes managers in the public sector and members of intellectual and artistic professions. The main distinctive feature of this group is its high volume of intellectual capital and the fact that many of its members work in the production and transmission of ideas and in the public sector. Some of these parents, whose economic capital is lower than that of parents of the previous group, live in middle-class communities but a larger proportion lives in gentrified neighborhoods in socially and ethnically mixed neighborhood. The third category, that of ‘mediators’ includes intermediate-level professionals and employees who are involved in relational tasks and work in the public sector while the fourth, that of ‘technicians’, includes intermediate-level professionals and employees who work in the private sector as well as a small group of self-employed craftsmen and merchants.
Results and interpretations

_Culture, money and networks in the enactment of school choices_

One of the main findings of the study is that different social class fractions make different types of school choices and that differences in choices are related to differences in capitals. ‘Technocrats’ favor school choices (residential choices and choice of a private school) that depend to a large extent on the possession of economic capital. The first type of choice is extremely costly, especially in big cities. The second is less so because of public subsidies to private schools in France, although parents still have to pay for things other than tuition (educational materials, extra-academic activities, dress, travels). ‘Technocrats’ also use their cultural and social capitals to make these choices but in a limited way because, in contrast to other choices, they require limited personal investment to get information and advice (available to some extent through impersonal agents and devices such as real estate agents, brochures or guides) and to obtain the desired services. These choices, especially the first, cannot be taken seriously into consideration not only by lower-class parents but also by intermediate-middle class parents and ‘intellectuals’, unless they accept to sacrifice their present wellbeing for their children future by accepting to live in small apartments nearby prestigious schools. They tend therefore to close off opportunities for all these groups.

‘Intellectuals’ on the other hand more frequently opt for choice of another public school or for voice in the local school, either from an exclusive bonding perspective that emphasizes the advantages to be gained by their own children or from an inclusive bonding perspective that focuses on the improvement of school quality for all children. Both of these choices suppose a combination of cultural and of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ social capital in order to be enacted effectively. To choose another public school, parents
need to collect and decode information that is not officially available because choice of public schools is not encouraged in the French system, through contacts with school professionals and with other parents. The activation of their cultural as well as of their ‘internal’ and ‘external’ social capital allows them to compare schools and to refine the matching process. Networks are still much more important for voice. Parents need to interact effectively with other middle-class parents to convince them to stay in the local school and to participate either in the creation of exclusive tracks or in the improvement of global school quality. They also depend on building networks with teachers to monitor their children’s experiences and to work on behalf of other children.

_Culture, money and networks in the preparation and follow up of school choices_

School choices do not only imply short-term decisions but long-term strategies as well. These are related to the need to prepare children to be able to cope and to accept the educational choices that their parents think are the best for them. The analysis of these strategies shows again significant differences between ‘technocrats’ and ‘intellectuals’ linked to their different use of their economic, cultural and social capitals. ‘Technocrats’ combine economic and cultural capital in their strategies to produce ‘successful children’ and to support their school careers in demanding educational environments. These include the provision of sophisticated educational equipment, private tuition or short-term stays abroad to learn a foreign language. These parents also use a combination of economic and social capital in their more global educational strategies, which include choices of places of residence, schools or extracurricular activities in order to create or recreate selective environments where children learn to think and behave as other children of their same social group.
‘Intellectuals’ on the other hand rely strongly on their own cultural capital and on the development of their children’s intellectual autonomy to increase their chances to be admitted and to succeed in academically demanding educational environments. Their educational strategies, which are based on the transmission and sharing of cultural tastes and on well-argued discussions on cultural, social and political questions including school choices, also rely strongly on cultural capital. Local social networks are however also seen as importance influences on children’s socialization.

Conclusion

The impact of various types of school choices on educational careers

Limited evidence suggests that choice of another public school or ‘exclusive voice’ in local public schools are more effective strategies than opting out for private schools for admission into selective higher education tracks in France. This is linked to the fact that the selection process into preparatory classes leading to ‘grandes écoles’ advantages students coming from public schools. ‘Intellectuals’, who rely on these strategies, seem therefore to still be the winners in the competition for these scarce and prestigious educational places leading to scarce and prestigious occupational and social positions. However, through residential choices, allowing them access to the best public schools ‘technocrats’ are ‘buying in’ the traditional advantages of ‘intellectuals’ in the French context. Also, because of their increasing attractiveness, private schools have recently become much more academically selective and improved their results dramatically, which might lead to changes in selection into ‘preparatory classes’. While there is clearly an erosion of the advantage of ‘intellectuals” in the French educational system, it is still too early to assert that ‘technocrats’ have now acquired a dominant position. In
fact, the examination of the social background of students in the most selective ‘grandes écoles’ shows that a large proportion have one ‘parent’, more frequently the father, who is a ‘technocrat’ and the other, more frequently the mother, who is an ‘intellectual’ showing that it is the combination of capitals and choices that is most effective. This has various implications for policy and research including the need for more serious consideration of the impact of family dynamics on educational careers.