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

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Theoretical framework (1)

- Focus on 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 (cultural, economic, social) of their capitals.

- Focus 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 real or potential competitors.

- School choice seen as a key individual closure strategy in political and social contexts where previous institutional barriers have been weakened and competition between social groups has increased.
Theoretical framework (2)

• A comprehensive view of choice that takes into account both exit and voice strategies and considers four types of choices (residential choices, choice of a private school, choice of a non-local public school, voice in the local school).

• Choice seen as influenced by a combination of individual determinants (aims, values, beliefs & resources) and of local configurations (social and ethnic composition of the population, housing and school markets, local policies).

• Choice studied as a ‘matching process’ involving action towards schools but also towards children in order to provide effective adjustment.
Methodology (1)

• Two research studies conducted between 2000 and 2007 with funding from two different national research programs and the collaboration of a large number of master students

• Fieldwork in four communities in the Parisian periphery:
  – two communities predominantly middle-class and comprising both public and private schools enjoying a good reputation
  – two communities characterized by social and ethnic mix and by a hierarchical school market comprising only or mainly public schools

• Fieldwork includes interviews with a large number (167) of parents, and with teachers, headteachers and local educational and political authorities, the analysis of qualitative and statistical data on schools, on housing and on local policies and observations of contexts and interactions.
Methodology (2)

• 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 nature of parents’ economic and cultural capital as well as work sector:
  – Technocrats
  – Intellectuals
  – Mediators
  – Technicians
Culture, money and networks in the enactment of school choices (1)

• ‘Technocrats’ favor:
  – Residential choices
  – Choice of a private school

• Both choices depend on economic resources
  – Residential choices linked to the desire of living near schools with very good reputations are extremely costly in cities.
  – Choice of private schools are less costly although parents have to pay for things other than tuition (educational materials, extra-academic activities, dress, travels)

• Cultural and social resources are not so important to prepare these choices because parents can refer to various impersonal agents & devices
Culture, money and networks in the enactment of school choices (2)

• ‘Intellectuals’ more frequently opt for:
  – Choice of another public school
  – Voice in the local school (exclusive or inclusive)

• Both choices suppose a combination of cultural and of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ social capital
  – To collect, process and interpret information that is not officially available from school professionals and from other parents in order to compare schools, to learn about their selection practices, and to refine the matching process with their children.
  – To interact in effective ways with school professionals & with other parents in order to monitor their children’s experience and/or to improve the quality of the local school.
Culture, money and networks in the preparation & follow up of school choices (1)

• ‘Technocrats’
  – Combine economic and cultural capital in their strategies (provision of sophisticated educational equipment, private tuition, summer camps abroad...) to produce ‘successful children’ and to support their school careers in demanding educational environments
  – Combine economic, cultural and social capital in their more global educational strategies, which are based on the reproduction of selective environments where children learn to think and behave as other children of their same social group.
Choice as a long term process: anticipation & follow up (2)

• ‘Intellectuals’
  – Rely strongly on their own cultural capital and on the development of their children’s intellectual autonomy for them to be successful in academically demanding educational environments
  – Rely strongly on cultural capital to transmit their cultural tastes to their children and to argue with them about school and other types of choices, but also on the influence of local social networks.
Conclusion

The impact of various types of school choices on educational careers (1)

• Limited evidence suggests that choice of another public school or ‘exclusive voice’ in local public schools are more effective than opting out for private schools for admission into selective HE tracks, to the advantage of ‘intellectuals’

• This is linked to the nature of the selection process into preparatory classes leading to ‘grandes écoles’ that advantages students coming from prestigious public schools.
Conclusion
The impact of various types of school choices on educational careers (2)

• 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 during the last years and improved their results dramatically, which might lead to changes in selection into ‘preparatory classes’.