



Analysis of Educational Policies Network.

University of Burgundy-IREDU –Institute of Research on Education (CNRS)

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### **Feelings of fairness in their context**

Sociology has focused, for a long time, on describing and analysing « objective » social inequalities in various contexts, including in schools. Much attention has thus been given to elucidating the processes that produce them, particularly in the case of school politics, which has given rise to a number of colloquiums previously held by the RAPPE.

However – and this is linked in some ways to changes in sociology itself (which no longer looks down on the interest in the « subjective side » of phenomena) but also and especially to a certain number of social changes – the manner in which individuals experience inequalities and debate over them has come to occupy a greater place in research. Research has thus shown the vivacity of debates around the questions involving fairness in contemporary societies. Such debates are fuelled, in great part, by the lasting tension between the principle of equality for all and the actual inequalities present. Judgements and the feeling of fairness in individuals appear as very complex (cf. Boudon, 1995; Dubet, 2005). Far from being based solely on abstract procedures concerning the allocation of goods (concerned with maintaining good proportions between contributions and remunerations), they belong to systems of concrete interactions, incorporating cognitive dimensions (thus the ways detected inequalities are perceived are influenced by the knowledge people have about their origin). For example, Bowles and Gintis (1998) have shown that attitudes towards redistribution politics (for example) can be explained less through the use of the usual variables of income or social position than through the reasons why we think the poor are poor, the importance we give, in considering individual destinies, to effort, luck, etc.. More generally speaking, the great number of principles of fairness leads to endless argumentation, since what may seem fair according to one principle can very well seem unfair if looked at from another angle, ending in a situation, which Dubet (2006) describes as filled with constant “critical rounds”.

It seems then essential to understand the origin and changing character of these judgements. We may particularly ask to what extent they lead to collective or individual (real or latent) mobilisation or, on the contrary, contribute to actually legitimating inequalities, thus constituting the main factor in contemporary “ordinary domination” (Martucelli, 2001). In order to move ahead in this direction and within an analytical perspective, we should distinguish between, on the one hand, general judgements on fairness, which concern the standards that are supposed to govern the way society functions and to generate a just order of things, and, on the other hand, the appraisals given of France today and its own situation. Social psychology (Kellershall et al., 1997), but also

sociology (Dubet, 2006) show us that divergences can exist between the feeling of frustration and individual unfairness and the feeling of social unfairness (within the current social rules), and so between fairness at a micro and macro levels. Finally, as soon as judgements are involved in a concrete situation, we can expect to find marked differences depending on the diversity of individual positions.

Much can be revealed about these questions by confronting disciplines, particularly researchers in political science, sociology, economy, social psychology... For example, the latter has been interested specifically in feelings of fairness, round the concept of “believing in a fair world”, as an adaptivity mechanism that is socially learned and possesses important psychological functions on the individual level, allowing the individual to believe that his environment is predictable and controllable. Hence, this discipline favours analyses concerned with interiorising, in modern societies, the “internality norm”, which invites everyone to explain what happens to him/her through factors that depend on him/her. Moreover, some researchers, such as Lorenzi-Cioldi (2002), underline the fact that those who dominate will usually explain their own position through personal qualities and/or factors they can control, the “internality norm” being more important with them than with those who are dominated and who will mention factors they cannot control, such as exterior factors or luck. Apparently, this is due, in large part, to the influence of the school system, whose role is to reinforce the idea that success or failure depend on personal factors. This obviously recalls the arguments of Bourdieu and Passeron, which are yet to be systematically confronted with the contributions of social psychology and, of course, with empirical testing.

For, as far as sociologists are concerned, the question concerning the true interiorisation of the meritocratic ideology has been insufficiently explored and often leads to contradictory conclusions. For, while Bourdieu and Passeron considered that each one had to learn considering inequalities as legitimate, Forsé and Parodi (2004) show a more critical position of the educated, who make up a category taking frequently on the posture of the “impartial spectator”. Conversely, some international surveys (see for example Noll and Roberts, 2003) reveal instead a more marked adherence to meritocracy amongst high executives (contrasted in this case with a more egalitarian attitude). Hence, it is useful to confront various descriptions of feelings of fairness, retrace the origin of each (along different ages and life periods) as well as their relation to different social contexts: schooling in one context or another, professional life in one work environment or another, differences between countries (see for example Lipp, 2005), etc..

The question of the origin and effects of feelings of unfairness can also involve school experience. We may consider three different facets to the origin of the feeling of unfairness in school: the existence of inequalities (1), then perceiving these inequalities as unfair, which depends on how their seriousness (2) and how their relation to fairness criteria are perceived. Social psychology has revealed that the perception of their seriousness is a subjective process. It appears, for example, that repeating students usually consider a little fight less unfair than other students do. Two

attitudes are possible towards this subjective dimension. We may think that it is illusory to try to perceive, beyond their mere feelings, the unfairness of which students are truly victims. This question is obviously not specific to the school environment: many inequalities are not perceived as unfair, and we know that it's very difficult to objectively decide what is unfair, when sometimes even long lawsuits can't do so... Still, we can assume that it's only the way unfairness is felt that produces effects. We can also consider that it's a question of perception biases activated through defence mechanisms, that what produces civic or psychological effects, in the long and medium run, is real unfairness, and that we must then try to reach a "corrected" representation of the feelings of unfairness.

Social psychology seems to suggest that such biases could come from the opposite direction: The weakest students may overestimate the experienced unfairness through a mechanism of external attribution, but the most unfairly treated children – who, as it seems, are also the weakest ones (Meuret and Desvignes, 2006) – may underestimate the experienced unfairness in order to reinstate the belief in a fair world, for example (Hafer and Bègue, 2005). The error made due to this bias may concern the real scope of the unfairness experienced by students, the category of students it primarily affects (the students most unjustly treated through their orientation apparently tend to underestimate the unfairness they are victims of, but we may imagine other biased categories: the type of family education, general opinion about teachers and school, etc.), the education systems it primarily affects (a system fostering open discussions about unfairness may appear more unfair than another which endeavours to repress them, a system placing all students together may elicit more feelings of unfairness than one which separates students into different class levels where the students of each level do not know how those of other levels are treated...). Hence, we may ask: what do we know about the actual unfairness affecting students? How can we conduct surveys about it or reflect upon the feelings of unfairness among students in such a way that we can make better assessments?

Regarding the criteria needed, it seems that the tripartite division, equality/merit/respect (or autonomy) suggested by Dubet (1999, 2005) should constitute our starting point. All research seems to find somewhat these same criteria (Kellerhals et al. 1997). However, we may go further in studying their combinations: to what extent do they vary according to the fields of school experience (receiving a mark, orientating or punishing according to formal procedures, interactions targeting learning, interactions targeting education and behaviour) or the characteristics of students? Criteria supply, to a certain extent, the substance for a normative understanding of the origin of the feeling of unfairness. We may also wonder about the way elementary unfair occurrences come together to constitute a lasting feeling of unfairness, which alone can truly have serious negative effects.

As for the effects of unfairness, we may distinguish between immediate effects, on well-being, work, relations at school, involvement in tasks and school results, and the mediate effects:

perseverance in the school career, ethical and civic attitudes, trust in the institutions and also the relation to unfairness in general: the way that unfair occurrences at school lead the student to develop one conception or another of fairness is an important subject. Some of these effects have already been documented in the education field: on learning and well-being; some may be considered as probable, thanks to research conducted particularly on the workplace (Dieckman et al., 2004, Dubet, 2006); while we have no knowledge concerning others.

This colloquium will be held in Dijon on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of March, 2007. Conferences by specialists from different horizons are planned: they will survey the work done and the questions that remain open in this field (L. Bègue, C. Dalbert, K.A. Diekmann, F. Dubet, M. Forsé, J. Kellerhals and A. Trannoy will be appealed to). There will also be papers presented in answer to this call for papers, and, depending on the proposals received, a specific workshop for PhD students may be held.

**Proposals must be sent by the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2006**, at the latest, to the Université de Bourgogne-IREDU, M. Duru-Bellat and D. Meuret, Pole AAFE, BP26513, 21065 DIJON, France. They will be examined by two RAPPE members. Answers will be sent at the end of January. **Registration for the colloquium will be closed on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, 2007.**

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