Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive view of the functioning of urban schools in the Parisian urban periphery with two main purposes. The first is to argue on a theoretical and empirical basis that, in order to understand urban schools and urban educational systems, it is necessary to take into account both external and internal factors and, especially, schools’ interactions with their social and institutional environment. The second is to analyze the two-way relationship between the logic of action of each school, that is, its leading orientation as it can be reconstructed from the analysis of discourses and practices, and academic, social and ethnic segregation of pupils. In order to do that, I use empirical material collected in a large study of the Parisian periphery, covering three different research projects; on the interaction between urban and school segregation, on competition between schools and on parental choice of schools. This study was conducted in four different urban areas (two predominantly white and middle class and two socially and ethnically mixed) and 25 secondary middle schools (22 state and 3 private). The first section of the chapter presents a general model for analyzing urban schools, which examines the interplay between policies, local dynamics, and the perspectives of educational professionals in schools. The second section discusses in some detail six ideal types of logics of action representing different responses to different constraints and opportunities resulting from policies, environmental factors, or internal dynamics. The final section of the paper is concerned with the interactive relationship between schools’ logics of action and segregation.
A Model for the Analysis of Urban Schools: The Interplay of Policies, Local Configurations and Professional Perspectives

Urban schools, as most schools, have frequently been analyzed in French research in education, from two main perspectives. The first one is “top down” and focuses on the impact of specific policies, such as educational priority areas, on school dynamics and results. The second is more of a “bottom only” perspective that focuses on internal relationships between managers and teachers and between teachers, and pupils in relation with individual and group aims, expectations, and practices (Bidwell, 2000). Both perspectives are fundamental, but not sufficient to understand school processes. In order to develop a global comprehension of schools as specific institutions and organizations, it is also important to take into account two specific kinds of local dynamics. The first has to do with community and parental perspectives and practices. The second concerns organizational interdependencies between schools catering for the same age group or for other age groups (Meyer & Rowan, 1978). These local dynamics are important to understand schools in general but also to observe subtler differences between schools unaccounted for in studies of policy impact or in research on schools’ internal configurations.

It is indeed important that work on urban schools focuses not only on deprived schools but on other kinds of schools both to get a comprehensive view on the diversity of urban schools and to analyze urban educational systems as configurations where each school must be understood as being dependant on the functioning of other schools. In my own work, I first tried to integrate the four dimensions just mentioned (educational policies, internal configurations, community organization, and institutional interdependencies) in a model of analysis of deprived schools in the Parisian urban periphery (van Zanten, 2001). I have since tried to extend it to other kinds of schools in the same metropolitan area, that is to socially and ethnically mixed and to selective schools (Delvaux & van Zanten, 2006), and, more recently, in work in progress, to elite schools. This perspective has allowed me to gain better understanding of different school and urban processes and especially of school segregation, which is by definition a relational process between urban areas and between schools.

Policies

Educational policies, understood both as normative orientations and as specific arrangements that render some actions more desirable and easier than others, are an essential element in understanding how schools function. It is important however not to conceive of policy as being only a clearly designed set of targets, objectives, arrangements, and resources and to move from the formal analysis of official prescriptions to the ethnographic study of policy-in-action at local levels of decision-making and schools (Ball, 1994). Contrary to a common view, this may be as important – and perhaps even more important – in still quite centralized systems like the French one as in decentralized systems because in the former the gap between national goals and procedures and specific situations produces a lot of “deviations,” which are either ignored or tolerated by educational officials. In addition, the French educational system, which has always been much more complex than it seemed, having for instance different modes of controlling state and private schools and each of the educational levels and types of schools, has