What Makes for Fair Schooling?

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INTRODUCTION

Slogans calling for “une école juste” (fair schooling) are often as vague as they are effective in mobilising public opinion: though there is apparent agreement on the desirability of greater fairness in education, the matter of defining fair schooling parameters is extremely complex and riddled with ambiguity:

1. Is fair schooling purely meritocratic, involving perfect scholastic competition among unequal pupils?
2. Does it go further than this, compensating for social inequalities by providing more to those who have less, thereby breaking with strictly meritocratic equality?
3. Is it schooling that guarantees a minimum of knowledge and skills to pupils so that the inequalities it generates itself do not cause the situation of weak pupils to deteriorate even further? In this case, fairness implies offering guarantees of the utility of all types of study and training programs.
4. It may also be fair schooling is schooling in which curricular and performance hierarchies have relatively little effect once pupils are out of school; in fair schooling the first concern is to ensure that all are socially integrated and that pupil rankings do not affect the equal dignity of individuals.

It is tempting to affirm that fair schooling should encompass all these conceptions of fairness and others besides. But this is to assume that a unitary or all-embracing concept is possible, whereas each of these ideas of fairness immediately runs counter to the others, if not at the level of principle, at least in practice and in terms of education policy. A fair scholastic meritocracy does not ensure reduction of inequalities; a concern for pupils’ social integration may very well increase the likelihood of their following precisely the socio-occupational trajectories that have already been to a considerable degree determined by their social origin; policy emphasis on minimum common knowledge and skills could well limit the expression of individual talents; and schooling arrangements attentive to students’ individuality could well have deleterious effects on the transmission of shared culture, transmission which is a duty for all schools and which is in itself a form of fairness. Clearly there is no perfect solution; there are instead more or less satisfactory combinations of models and necessarily partial answers.

The combination of models that prevails and so defines what makes for fair schooling in a given country and at a precise period in time can be understood with
regard to the historical background of the country and the present characteristics of its educational system. In this paper, we will start from the French case, but we are convinced that the issues at stake have a broader relevance. Putting in perspective the French prevailing conceptions of justice and some research results concerning the actual functioning of the system, this text brings to light some of the limitations of the models commonly used to conceive of and reflect on fairness in education. It is informed by the conviction that sociologists’ responsibility is not limited to injecting facts into the public debate, however reliable those facts may be, but also and just as imperatively involves reflecting on the models used to understand those facts, models which are necessarily political or moral in nature.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND MERIT

In modern democratic education, everything turns on equality and merit. Whereas in Ancien Régime societies, in general aristocratic ones, priority was given to birth, democratic societies have resolutely chosen merit as a fundamental principle of fairness and justice. In this understanding, France’s educational system is supposed to be both central and fair because everyone can succeed in school in a way commensurate with his or her efforts and attributes. Actually, up until the 1960s, merit came into play in France only on the margins: thanks to the scholarship system, a number of hardworking and “gifted” working-class children were able to leave behind the primary school (in which most of them were tracked) and accede to secondary education. A minority of them were able to obtain the baccalauréat. Republican elitism was thus founded on an incompletely effective principle of merit, and the école républicaine was criticised with the intention of extending and generalising merit principles so that all pupils might be given a chance in the same competitive system. This was the idea behind several reforms launched just after World War 2.

In the last fifty years, the meritocratic principle has gradually been extended. First came middle school for all; later, lycée admission was widened considerably, followed by higher secondary education. In matters of merit, the system became fairer, in that it now allowed all pupils to enter the race in a unified, theoretically homogeneous system. Formally, theoretically, all pupils today may lay claim to a chance at excellence because in principle everyone whose scholastic record is good enough can enrol in the most prestigious study programs. In practice, this purely meritocratic conception of scholastic fairness is running up against major difficulties today. What are they?

96 Till the beginning of the 60s, the French system was organised into two distinct tracks: five years of primary school (which could be followed by a vocational course) for the lower social background children, and secondary school (including a specific primary course), leading in seven years to the baccalauréat, this track being followed by the most privileged children.

97 To give only one example, the percentage of a generation reaching the level of the baccalauréat rose from about 5% in 1950 to 40% in 1986, and is about 67% today.