EDUCATION, SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY
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1. Education as a right and as an element of social stratification

- There exists some social differentiation in all human societies. Societies are divided into ranks corresponding to the social positions they have for their individual members. These ranks are based directly or indirectly on the division of labour and influenced by the historical context. This vertical hierarchy is called “social stratification”. The concept of stratification is usually applied to studies of structural social inequality. That means studies of any systematic inequalities between groups of people, which arise as unintended consequences of social processes and relationships. The major variables in this respect are social class, gender and ‘race’ (or ethnic group). Gender and ‘race’ can not be reduced to social class.

- In contemporary societies education is one of the most important elements for social stratification because the knowledge, skills and attitudes learnt in school are considered important for the sustaining and development of a society. However, basic education is also a social right by e.g. the United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights. Every individual should have right to education despite her/his social class, income and place of residence. Globally, we are far from this goal. Nearly one third of world’s adult population is illiterate. In industrially developed societies, equal opportunities to education have realised rather well in many areas.

- The reason to the expansion of education is not, however, only justice, but also a particular ideology called meritocracy (Halsey et al. 1997, 632). Meritocracy has become the major justification for the process of socialization, selection and control
exercised by education system. According to meritocracy individuals should be treated
by their abilities. It should be allowed to an individual to make efforts for her/his
success based on her/his personal abilities or as an equation:

\[ \text{INTELLIGENCE + EFFORT = MERIT} \]

- By the educational expansion the number of students from lower social classes and from
different ethnic background as well as the number of female students has increased
tremendously. In terms of relative and relational differences inequality is still there and
often it has increased.

2. Definitions of educational equality

- So, there are at least four major areas to consider in education policy:
1. provision (quantity and quality of education available, organization of education
   system),
2. access (selection and its criteria), 3. utilization (meaning of education in people’s life)
   and
3. outcomes (degrees and performances and the definitions of them). The perfect equality
   of outcomes would be both impossible and undesirable, but still it is grounded to
   analyse outcomes.

- We can identify a narrow or conservative and wide or radical definition of educational
  equality depending on whether an intervention into conditions to inequality is included
  or not the definition of equal opportunity (Husen 1972).

- One way to assess equal opportunity from a wide perspective is to compare the
distributions of students and graduates by social class, sex and ethnic group to the
 corresponding distributions in the whole age group. This practice is common in social
 research as is connecting this analysis to intergenerational social mobility by including
 parents’ social and cultural background.

- The highly optimistic view of education’s role in reducing social inequality prevalent in
1960’s and early 1970’s has not realised. A more pessimistic view is well expressed in
Shavit’s and Blossfeld’s (1993) comparative study on education and intergenerational mobility in 13 countries. The title of this book is ‘Persistent Inequality’.

3. Explanations of inequality

- On the comparative level, studies like Shavit’s and Blossfeld’s indicate that the patterns of social mobility are very similar in countries where a market economy and a nuclear family are central social institutions (Dronkers 1997). My more personal remark is that it seems to have been rather similar also in those communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe that participated in comparative studies. Does it mean that a nuclear family is a sufficient condition to inequality or are there other explanations?

- An accelerated economic competition and globalization have been influencing social inequality in general and thus less and more indirectly educational inequality. This is the case in Finland and I understand that it can be the case in Russia as well (Konstantinovski 2003).

- Among the countries the Nordic welfare societies are interesting cases. In Shavit’s and Blossfeld’s study Sweden and the Netherlands were those countries where some slight levelling down in different social classes’ participation in education was found to have happened. Norway and Finland did not participate the study, but according to Lindbekk (1998) and Kivinen, Ahola & Hedman (2001) a slight levelling down have happened in Norway and Finland, too. First, all these countries have a clear state regulation and control in education. In the Netherlands, there are private schools besides public schools, but also they are controlled by the state. Second, there is a high public funding in education based on taxes collected by the state.

- There is a female majority among secondary and higher educated population in some countries, e.g. in Finland. An understanding of the expansion of the number of women in education must consider, in addition to the structure of the educational system, recent economic, demographic, social and cultural changes in contemporary Europe (Jonsson 2003).
- The first conclusion was that Sweden is not a very different case but an extreme case within the same pattern. Second, equalization has not touched all social classes and not the whole after World War II period. In a detailed statistical analysis of the survey data, two variables explained more than 50% of the correlation between social class and participation in education in all countries. Those variables were school achievement and attitude to transitions.

- In several studies, including my own studies on educational life courses and life histories, it has been observed and interpreted, that since the early school years an individual often follows the cultural manuscript of her/his social class and its way of life with images of self and personal abilities. Theoretically, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as a system of cognitive (‘eldos’), ethical and moral (‘ethos’) and body (‘hexis’) schemes dispositions could explain this phenomenon (Bourdieu 1990).

- The first habitus, primary habitus, has been formed already in early (class-based) family socialization. The secondary habitus acquired at school and among peers can be different, but not without struggle against structural constrains. Often, the change of habitus requires a change in life course in the form of challenge or even crisis.

References:


Further reading:

Textbooks:

Advanced:

Handbooks: