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Diversity at school as a lever for success?

Resources and limits of two models in Brussels

La mixité à l'école comme levier de réussite ? Ressources et limites de deux modèles bruxellois

Gemengde scholen als hefboom voor succes? Mogelijkheden en limieten van twee Brusselse modellen

Emmanuelle Lenel

Translator: Jane Corrigan

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Emmanuelle Lenel

Diversity at school as a lever for success ?
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This article examines the democratic ideal of diversity in the broad sense, in the field of education. Based on two case studies of schools in Brussels which meet the challenges of diversity in Brussels in two very different ways, the author uses ethnographic data to put universalist and communitarianist integration models into perspective. She attempts to show that these two types of school do not simply constitute an ethical and philosophical alternative, but that they contribute to shaping different students. Beyond their impact on educational success and segregation, each model of school favours the three logics differently – strategies for success, integration and personal growth – which students must combine within the school environment.

Emmanuelle Lenel *is a sociologist and assistant at the Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis. After conducting several research studies on education in connection with gender issues, she began working on a doctorate in the area of urban sociology.*
She recently published 'Réussir au pluriel. Facteurs et logiques de la différenciation sexuée des trajectoires scolaires dans le secondaire', in Une fille = un garçon?, identifier les inégalités de genre à l'école pour mieux les combattre*, Gavray, Cl., Adriaenssens, A. (dir.), L'harmattan, forthcoming.*

Contacts :

Emmanuelle Lenel, lenel@fusl.ac.be

Christophe Mincke (senior ed.) : mincke@fusl.ac.be
+32 (0)473/210.265

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1. Introduction

For the past ten years or so, the notion of diversity has experienced renewed interest on behalf of the public. In the field of education, it has become an obvious democratic ideal. There appears to be a need to promote social mix in particular in order to achieve more justice at school. But is it always the best instrument to encourage success and – more generally – the future integration of students in society? By wandering a little from the most firmly fixed representations in the area of education, we propose to take part in the debate by questioning some of the actual processes of diversity at school. How is it implemented in different contexts? What does it lead to? The existence of deterministic notions other than merit and competence as a school's only founding principles calls for an investigation of the effects of teaching conditions on education. We shall do this here based on a study of two schools in Brussels carried out within the framework of research[1] conducted between October 2008 and October 2009 covering all of the French Community, which was aimed at shedding light on the mechanisms at work in the gender-based differentiation of educational pathways. This spotlight on contrasting realities does not claim to give reasons for failure – a reality which greatly concerns certain categories of youth in Brussels. From a more limited point of view, it aims to bring into perspective the model(s) of success with which they are confronted. In this article, the term 'diversity' is used in the broadest sense. The notion is questioned thoroughly in its cross-cutting nature, by intersecting the various social and gender-based differentiations, as well as those based on class and ethnic origin, as none of these dimensions are independent of the others.

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[1] This article re-examines a small part of the data from the research conducted by the Centre d'Etudes Sociologiques which was supervised by A. Franssen, professor at the Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, thanks to a grant from the Equal Opportunities Directorate of the French Community of Belgium. The research was presented in a more systematic manner in 'Réussir au pluriel. Facteurs et logiques de la différenciation sexuée des trajectoires scolaires dans le secondaire' by Lenel, E., in Gavray, Cl., Adriaenssens, A., collective work, L'harmattan, forthcoming. I would like to thank A. Franssen for his thorough re-reading of this article.

2. Two models of school

Schools are not interchangeable entities. On the contrary, they are microcosms with their 'own efficiency' in terms of education (Cacouault-Bitaud & Oeuvrard, 2009). The two schools studied – located in two municipalities in the inner ring of Brussels – nevertheless appear emblematic due to their way of dealing with certain challenges presented by the diversity which characterises this multicultural city marked by social polarisation. As such, it seemed to us that it was possible to use them as the basis for two typical models of school – among other possibilities which would have been interesting to compare in the framework of a broader analysis – which allow an understanding of the different concrete approaches to diversity in the field of education beyond local level.

These case studies were conducted during an academic year in an ethnographic approach[2] by combining several techniques. In each school, the main documents related to the school work plan were analysed. Approximately twelve one-on-one comprehensive interviews were also held with the school's different stakeholders (headmaster, teachers, psychological/medical/social centres, students) in order to understand the value and representation systems. Finally, participant observations took place at 'key moments' in guidance (class councils, activities, information sessions, etc.) in order to understand the non-verbal dimensions of interactions.

2.1. The 'school of diversity'

The first school – which we shall call the 'school of diversity' – is a big school offering the three forms of education. Its good reputation is above all linked to general education provision, which concerns approximately 80% of the students. The two other forms are offered with an explicitly democratic aim, in order to allow the weaker students to choose a new pathway in the school and thus avoid forming a 'VIP school' which would keep only the best students in the end. The population of the school is mixed in terms of social and above all ethnic origins, reflecting the population of the multicultural neighbourhood where a quarter of the students live. This diversity constitutes one of the school's main banners, brandished by the educational stakeholders as well as by the students. In recent years, a policy of diversity has also prevailed in the organisation of classes, whose principle is to bring together a variety of options and students. Unlike what is done in many schools, repeaters are mixed with the other students.

This 'mixing of populations' policy is implemented as an instrument intended to favour equal opportunities and the integration of students as citizens in society, according to a contemporary societal leitmotif. Diversity is upheld by the school on two accounts. On the one hand, it is upheld as an abstract principle intended to represent the general interest, with universalism as the scope of reference. According to a 'republican'-type integration model, the mix must allow a homogenisation of behaviour and pathways among students of different social origins, cultural backgrounds and educational levels, based on models which appear to be the most 'normal', or

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[2] For a more complete presentation of the methodology used for the entire study, please refer to the research report on the website of the Equal Opportunities Directorate at www.egalite.cfwb.be.

the most capable of favouring participation in society. Diversity is perceived as a precondition for equality, understood here as a similarity in the goals to be reached. In this sense, the heterogeneous organisation of classes is aimed at countering the effects of composition (definition of common expectations and projects) and conformity with group standards (copying of behaviour which appears to be the most normal). The presence of both strong and weak students in the classes as well as students with different pathways, ensures as much as possible that the educational behaviour and expectations of the weakest students do not have a negative influence on each other and that the gap does not widen between the weakest and the strongest students.

On the other hand, diversity appears to constitute a fundamental value of the school as an everyday experience (Collet & Philippe, 2008). It is indeed advocated as a source of personal growth and is recognised as such by the students and their families. As regards the school, this support for mix is based less on the recognition of cultural diversity as such than on the conviction that students should have the possibility to direct their educational pathway according to their personal preferences. The contact with others and the exposure to diversity should allow this 'free choice', by favouring the emancipation of students with respect to their destiny as determined by their various backgrounds. The regular organisation of extracurricular activities (cultural events of all types), as well as the provision of options with no social or gender-based connotations, are in keeping with this same perspective of broadening horizons. As regards the students, diversity and mix are perceived and valued as a means of opening one's mind, as well as a means of learning about social ties and life in society.

The expected beneficial effects of diversity must however be nuanced as regards certain empirical observations which tend to indicate its relative failure. First of all, with respect to the reduction of educational inequalities, the number of students enrolled in pathways and options at the school indicates a gradual separation of students according to sociocultural background. Those who come from families with less access to the legitimate culture promoted by the school converge gradually in the least prestigious sections. A wave of research (Berthelot, 1983; Lahire, 1995) demonstrated the decisive role played by the link between family culture and school culture in terms of success, as it allows a better inculcation of educational values and requirements. This of course does not apply specifically to the 'school of diversity' but instead suggests that the policy of diversity is not enough – at least not on its own – to prevent this process of segregation, which is more pronounced from one level of schooling to the next. Furthermore, the principle of diversification, which involves the provision of all three forms of education, whilst giving a predominant place to general education seems to reinforce the depreciation of the other forms, in particular vocational education. This marginal pathway truly has the status of 'rubbish pathway' among students at the school; a pathway out of the system which 'one ends up in', or worse, which 'one is put in' at the end of the race, after a series of failures. The students in this pathway are perceived as being the 'riffraff' of the school and as those who 'did not want to study'. Although it is hailed as a value, the experience of otherness can also favour attitudes of closed-mindedness and rejection. These observations tend to show that the logics of distinction and relegation operate above all based on educational profiles. Furthermore, educational diversity strictly speaking – the fourth dimension of diversity – appears to be impossible to

achieve from the moment that the system itself is governed by a principle of hierarchical organisation (among schools, forms of education and options).

The strategic logic which guides students in the early choice between a second year of Latin and a general second year offered by the school already expresses this principle of hierarchical organisation. This means that the best students remain in the 'right' section and the others avoid a future failure. It is the average or weak students (the majority) who abandon the possibility to study Latin as early as the second year, and at the same time exclude two out of five options in the third year. In other words, continuing to study Latin means leaving all options open, whereas discontinuing it means beginning a pathway with restricted possibilities. In order to attempt to find a solution to this problem, the school recently changed the names of the options so that students must now choose between a second year of Latin and a second year of science. The aim was to offer a true alternative rather than the possibility to follow the path of the elite or not. However, neither the choice of options in third year (the science options remain the most popular by far) nor, above all, the perceptions of teachers (students who choose the science option are perceived as being 'not as hard-working' and more 'rowdy') indicate that this change has had a true effect on the symbolic hierarchical organisation of options and on self selection with respect to Latin. On the contrary, this shows that there is indeed an 'educational ranking', which probably constitutes an overlooked element of diversity policies.

Finally, let us mention the role of the status granted to students in segregation. At this school, students have the rather traditional status of 'student', which restricts their existence to the school and their educational relationships, contrary to the status of 'student citizen', which exists in other types of school and takes the student's insertion into society into account (Marques Balsa & Van Campenhoudt, 1991). This traditional notion leads to expectations of students which concern primarily their 'job as students', sanctioned above all according to how well they do this job. Only educational results and the attitude towards discipline count, unlike other schools which take psychological and social factors into consideration more often, for example. Meritocracy as a common evaluation principle is a translation of the idea of 'equal treatment', which is the philosophical foundation of diversity. Observations made at class council meetings show that the meritocratic principle seems to benefit girls more,[3] as they are praised more often for their work and behaviour. This is of course due to their better overall results at school, as well as to primary socialisation which makes them better prepared than boys to conform to expectations (Baudelot & Establet, 2007). Therefore, despite the objective – equal opportunities in terms of statistical probabilities of success – the universalist principle which underlies the meritocratic system may reinforce the differentiation mechanisms of educational pathways. The identical treatment which underlies the copresence of heterogeneous groups overshadows the characteristics specific to these groups and at the same time the advantages or disadvantages which they may represent with respect to educational challenges.

[3] The data gathered did not allow a verification of the impact of the meritocratic principle on the social and cultural segregation of educational pathways in this school, although it is quite likely following what has been clearly demonstrated elsewhere. For this reason we shall limit our discussion to the effects of meritocracy on gender-based differentiations.

2.2. The 'school for girls'

The second school is located in a working-class neighbourhood with a high immigrant population. Most of its students are inhabitants of the neighbourhood and the neighbouring municipalities. It also offers the three forms of education, but this time the technical and vocational pathways account for the majority of students. This school is traditionally a 'school for girls' – which is the name we have given it – and for the past few years boys have been allowed to attend as well, yet girls still represent the vast majority of the students. The continuation of a non-mix in terms of gender had the accepted purpose of preserving 'an area of freedom' for young girls, most of whom are Muslims of north African or Turkish origin from a cultural environment whose traditionalist notion of relationships between the sexes is perceived as being unfavourable to their education. Furthermore, the educational and philosophical culture of the school explicitly promotes equal opportunities for girls. For example, girls are not allowed to wear a headscarf on school property. This is in keeping with a widely shared view in the western world that the headscarf is one of the most powerful symbols of the subordination of women in Muslim culture, as it contributes to making them characterless non-sexualised 'objects'. The provision of training is also aimed at ensuring that students are well prepared for the job market. It is for this reason in particular that the general pathway is maintained 'at all costs' despite the obvious loss of interest in it, in order not to 'condemn' the young girls in the neighbourhood to technical and vocational choices which are generally not very promising on the job market and which are the only pathways offered by the other schools in the neighbourhood.

This principle of gender-based and ethnic homogeneity and the organisation of the school overall are in keeping with a particularist approach to integration. In the same way that its status as a school which practises positive discrimination allows it to receive various types of compensation (financial, support, etc.) to attempt to make up for the effects of social origin on education, the school takes certain cultural specificities and presumed specific needs of its students into consideration in order to propose adapted means for educational and social success. For example, the provision of training which has always tended to attract more girls (nursery nursing, nursing, etc.) is adapted to changes in the job market, but always with an aim to correspond to the supposed professional aspirations of students, i.e. the professions which typically appeal to girls most in their cultural environment.

In the same perspective, this social grouping is perceived by the school as being favourable to the success of these young girls for two reasons. Firstly, as mentioned above, because it is supposed to be an environment which is free of gender-based relationships of power, the girls are able to get involved more freely. But social grouping is also intended to provide a 'protective' environment as regards cultural relationships, as the supposed lack of cultural resources of this group and, in particular, of educational capital – which is translated into less or no educational support from parents – would presumably be unfavourable with respect to competition with other young people. It is in fact mutual assistance which counts as a first resource in coping with educational difficulties, with particularly strong relationships of solidarity being formed between the students at this school due to their shared conditions (as regards gender and origin). The grouping and special treatment policies championed by the school thus appear to be a tacit criticism of the prevailing view

of equality which, in its universalism, does not take into account the relationships of power which still mark the exchanges between different social groups. On the contrary, equality is interpreted here as equal means, which involves taking into account the differences in the 'baggage' of the various categories of student.

Although the school does not limit its access to students of foreign origin only, it does not try to recruit students from outside the neighbourhood. Several aspects of its school culture even tend to indicate that it seeks to 'stick' to its image of a 'good neighbourhood school', opening its doors to an underprivileged population of immigrant origin, whilst offering a good level of education. The school appears to be perceived by families as being the best educational opportunity in the immediate surroundings, especially for young girls, as families are often reluctant to send them further away. The school presents itself as a liberating school which is firmly rooted at local level, and as a means of escaping the probable destiny of mother and housewife which is in store for the girls in this 'difficult' neighbourhood. Whilst legitimising its status as a school which practises positive discrimination – and hence the additional means allocated to it – it also clearly rejects the stigmas of schools in this category and thus contributes to reinforcing its appeal among the local population. The dynamics involving the harmonisation of organisation and reputation nevertheless have another side, precisely as regards emancipation. These dynamics in fact contribute to confining these young girls to educational choices which are very strongly associated with the stereotypical gender-based division of work. This limitation to models defined by gender-based and cultural backgrounds is reinforced by the particularist approach to integration and success developed by the school, as this approach leads to culturalist representations of the students. Therefore, by defining them almost exclusively with respect to their belonging to a certain culture, the school develops expectations regarding its students, as well as guidance advice – or even requirements – which conform to the most common models in this culture.

On the other hand, contrary to a certain form of domination as assumed by the school, the arrival of boys does not seem to have led to gender relations which are unfavourable to girls' education. The fact that they clearly outnumber the boys seems to favour a greater assertion of their identity. The girls are indeed able to rely on the feeling that they are in a 'position of strength' to try to put an end to the gender relations which they have always known in their cultural environment. The girls say that they often use teasing and provocation in their contacts with boys, probably in an attempt to destabilise them and to unmask 'the "eternal masculine", guardian of the hard core of traditional culture' (Hassini, 1998: 166). This way of relating thus appears to be an attempt to deconstruct traditional relationships based on distance from the other sex, which is transposed by young boys in the context of coeducation, in particular by refusing to work or sit next to a girl in class.

In contrast to the generally accepted idea according to which social grouping constitutes a confinement and a withdrawal into one's community, can we not see it as a sort of anteroom before integration in the context of this school (Charmes, 2009)? In our opinion, the different observations allow us to postulate that this social grouping does indeed have integrating effects, even if they are not at all systematic. Without pleading for homogeneity as a solution to integration, we may indeed consider that this social grouping might also constitute an environment of resources and recognition, in particular for students who belong to groups with subordinate positions

in various social relationships, as is the case here. The possibility to assert one's own identity as a woman, as a daughter of immigrants and as a young person, has something of the nature of a transformation of relationships with one's group and with oneself. In the case of these young girls, this relationship with oneself tends to integrate the will to escape the hold of tradition without denying one's specific culture, and the will to have a life 'like everyone else' – two attitudes which are favourable to education and integration.

3. 'Good school' or 'good student'?

These contrasting empirical observations lead us to question if not the assumed effects of diversity on social integration then at least the dominating model of success in our society and the representations of the 'good school' which it implies. If the sought-after ideal is that of a good student who – after a flawless educational performance – enters university at the age of eighteen, then a 'good school' is certainly one which provides general education to a heterogeneous mix of students, and promotes the building of liberated individuals. The openness and mix which diversity is supposed to favour appear to be legitimate means to promote this performance ideal for all, i.e. including students who are the least endowed from a cultural point of view, because their aspirations would thus be raised. However, as pointed out by E. Charmes, 'in real public environments, openness still remains limited and mix always occurs to the benefit of a particular group. Behaviour in public environments is governed inevitably by specific standards' (2009: 10). This observation leads us to understand that 'raising' aspirations comes down to modelling the aspirations of working-class students on those of middle-class students. Therefore, beyond the universalist aim of this performance ideal, heterogeneousness in fact favours a 'standardisation' of behaviour and contributes to shaping individuals by copying the values and behaviour of the middle class. Furthermore, the image of the citizen itself, which is very present in the work plan of this type of school and which refers to an abstract and general individual, masks the particularist identity content upon which this image is built (Scott, 1998). In contrast, it may be observed – without defending communitarianism on the grounds that diversity does not keep all of its promises – that community grouping allows one to build oneself according to one's own standards.

If, on the contrary, we assume that many different models of success exist, we must therefore ask the question as to which contexts favour which types of success. Not only do the two models of school refer to different philosophical and educational choices, but they contribute to producing different students as well. Being a student means having to combine several types of logic of action. According to F. Dubet (1994), school fulfils three major functions and the student who lives in this triple system is expected to combine very different logics. First of all, in a universe with a hierarchical organisation of pathways and options, students develop strategic action in order to succeed according to social criteria of success and to distinguish themselves from others through their performance (distribution of abilities and qualifications function). But a school is also a more collective universe governed by opposing principles; that of the 'young community' which students try to become a part of according to the specific standards of life in a community, where they try to establish

an identity based on values shared by a group of peers (integration function). According to Dubet, this 'duality of the school experience is "arbitrated" by a third universe, that of the development of subjectivity' (1994: 204). School is also intended to produce subjects in keeping with the values it upholds (educational function). According to this reasoning, students must also develop an 'authentic' personality, i.e. they must free themselves from competition and conformism.

This view of education as a three-dimensional experience also raises the question regarding the definition of a 'good student'. Is it someone who pursues positive education according to shared criteria of success (performance, merit, Latin or science options, etc.), established in keeping with the structures of education and the job market? Or is it someone defined according to his or her ability to combine various identities (student, young person and subject), i.e. the ability to achieve his or her ideals of success, recognition and personal growth all at once, even if it means having to make compromises? In this case – and instead of taking a definite decision regarding the model of school to promote – we must identify the conditions which support the student in this effort to combine as well as those which act as an obstacle.

Thus, beyond the ethnic and philosophical debate regarding diversity and communitarianism, differentiation and lack of differentiation, and beyond a simplistic opposition between open schools and closed schools, the two models of school may be considered to favour a certain type of success. Indeed, in each model, one of the three functions of a school – as highlighted by Dubet – constitutes the major organisational principle around which the most characteristic elements of the school are structured, as regards its composition, its educational provision and its educational policies. For students, these elements constitute stimuli for the corresponding logic of action (strategy, integration or personal growth), whereas other contextual factors may slow them down in the pursuit of other logics. In other words, each of the models favours the achievement of an ideal, but may also lead to frustrations as regards other ideals; this frustration is expressed through a lack of motivation or a feeling of isolation or boredom, depending on the case.

Thus, the model of diversity contributes to producing an individual who is productive and free with respect to his or her social background. Its main organisational principle is that of emancipation, which is conveyed by the heterogeneous population of students as well as by certain educational principles aimed at cultural openness. These institutional characteristics favour the development of a student who lives the experience as a subject making 'personal' choices. The other important principle in this model – although to a lesser extent – is that of performance. Whilst seeking to propose options which are as neutral as possible in terms of the students' backgrounds, i.e. which have no social or gender connotations, the school ensures that its educational provision is valuable on the job market. But the heterogeneousness of the students and the classes can also reinforce certain segregative mechanisms. The direct confrontation with the 'normal' and expected pathways (the general pathway, the completion of secondary education at age eighteen, etc.) involves a symbolic form of violence for students whose pathway departs from expectations, which could lead to defeatism and a loss of self-worth.

In the community model, the school's organisation is almost entirely centred on the principle of integration. The multidimensional homogeneity of the students (ethnic, religious and gender-based) contributes to the solidarity between students as well as to an identification with values and common projects. These characteristics tend to produce students who are well integrated into their various groups. Moreover, the institutional policies which hinge on the recognition of a sense of identity and cohesion based on sameness are not necessarily counterproductive as regards self-emancipation, in as much as they favour a positive relationship with oneself. However, educational provision modelled on the assumed specificities of students may lead to frustrations as regards strategies for success based on the egalitarian values of the global society and its ideal in terms of performance. In particular, it may contribute to 'ranking' vocational projects among the least valued professions.

Emancipation and the management of diversity produce an ongoing tension which neither of the two models is able to resolve completely. Thus said, it does not involve subscribing to an absolute relativism which lays down the equivalence of the models, but rather underlining once again the fact that there are different ways of considering the modern ideal of the autonomous individual and the challenges of diversity. Everything depends on the way in which the sought-after autonomy is interpreted. It is either a personal and unconstrained definition of oneself, in which case the confrontation with diversity must enable an opening up of possibilities; or, from a more practical point of view, it is the possibility to take control of one's life, even if it means relying on one's belonging to various groups. Diversity at school would thus simply be one of several means to pursue this ideal.

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