

SOCIAL RELATIONS AND SCHOOL CHOICE IN SPAIN

XAVIER RAMBLA

Abstract – *The article presents the outcome of a sociological analysis of parents' (mostly, mothers') and teachers' reasoning on school choice in Spain. A general discussion of parental choice, as well as a specific discussion of its institutionalisation in Spain, define the framework of the analysis. Windisch's (1992) typology of everyday reasoning spells out how the two parties of the choice social relation, namely teachers and parents, justify it. The conclusion states that class and gender are salient factors if school choice is to be explained in different institutional settings.*

Introduction

Parental choice has become a central issue in sociology of education as a consequence of the introduction of market-led policies in the UK, the USA and elsewhere in the eighties. While it is not a major policy device in all European countries, some governments have recently started to introduce it in Southern Europe. This article will try to explore the social relations involved in school choice according to ethnographic evidence collected in Spain.

The main thesis defended in the article states that choice is embedded in gendered and classed unequal social relations, whatever the national setting. The argument will be defended by discussing the validity of analyses referred to Britain when extrapolated to Spain with caution. Furthermore, a typology of discourses expressed by the two parties of the choice social relation, i.e. teachers and parents, will add new evidence.

The sociological analysis of parental choice

Since the first experiments of the Thatcher government educational policy until the debates on quasi-markets, a rich bibliography has been produced in order to find out the links between school choice and other social phenomena such as class or gender. As a brief list reminding the importance of post-structuralism, feminism, policy analysis or institutional economics shows, several theories have been fruitful to grasp relevant aspects of the social relations involved in school

choice. Although it is not possible to review all their implications here, three main arguments can be recalled in order to frame the following analysis.

Firstly, parents' decisions vary significantly depending on their class position. Certainly, this factor does not determine decisions in a mechanical fashion, but its influence is recurrent in many researches carried out in different countries (Lareau, 1987, 1995; Edwards and Whitty, 1991; Ball, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997; Dale, 1994; David et al., 1997). Roughly speaking, proximity seems to be a stronger reason the lower the class position, as well as cost-benefit calculation and the effort to look for a 'good' school are more important for middle-class parents than they are for working-class parents. Some parallelism can be signalled if this evidence is compared with the analysis on family educational practices according to the theory of reproduction. However, that debate focused on everyday practices whose immediacy, seriality and indexicality are not explicit, whereas the analysis of parental choice is mainly an analysis of discursive consciousness. Giddens' (1993) distinction of practical and discursive consciousness supports the former comment.

Secondly, both parents seldom take care of school decisions in the same way, because mothers are made responsible in practice. David (1993b) has summarised the evidence on this point. Two considerations - namely, that school choice lies on the very middle of the public-private boundary, and that education has traditionally overlooked the private side of such a boundary (Arnot and Ivinson, 1997) - probably set the theoretical foundations to explain this bias. On the other hand, the distinction between practical and discursive consciousness becomes useful once again, since common and professional discourses have spuriously obscured the practical influence of gender relations on parental choice. David's (1993a) 'boundary approach' highlights the fact that the analysis of education is de-gendered when these discourses assume that the school boundaries are static.

And finally, school choice brings professional and everyday knowledge face to face. 'Families' draw on common theories of education when making decisions on their children's upbringing (Montandon and Perrenoud, 1994), although in fact it is women who develop this form of knowledge (Ribbens, 1994; Luttrell, 1995). Teachers also draw on their own professional knowledge, which is more related to practice and embeds more practical prejudices than academic educationalists often admit (Gomes, 1993). For this reason, professional and organisational discourses can eventually 'capture' lay perspectives on schooling and legitimate a social image of school choice that is far away from people's practice (Bowe et al., 1994; Boulton and Coldron, 1996).

Therefore, the research literature has come to sketch the school choice process as a social relation between teachers deploying their professional knowledge and mothers deploying their domestic knowledge. Besides, androcentrism

undervalues this second form of knowledge, and its eventual use varies according to the class position of families. It seems advisable to refer the former theoretical summary to Bourdieu's (1994) theory of fields of activity. Schooling can be considered as a field of activity where choices are movements locating actors along classed and gendered privilege lines. However, it is also advisable to keep in mind that both practice and discourse are crucial as far as choice is concerned; otherwise, the actors' reflexivity would be marginalised from the analysis.

Parental choice in Spain

Although quasi-markets have not been widely introduced, the educational system has traditionally induced families to choose between public and private schools in Spain. Before the Conservative party began to experiment voucher systems in Valencian infant schools after gaining the regional election in 1995, or the (also Conservative) central government introduced new criteria to define intake areas reinforcing parents' individual decision in 1997, for a long time many people had been actually choosing their children's school. Since a public schooling system was not complete until the mid-eighties, the Catholic Church kept a broad share of students at compulsory levels, and a laical private sector became also important in the most industrialised regions. Nowadays, private schools can be funded by the state if they submit to the criteria of 1985 Act on the Right to Education, and most of them actually do. As a consequence, almost 40% students in compulsory education attend private schools.

At the moment a comprehensive reform may have enhanced the salience of choice between the state and the private sectors for the last years. The pre-reform system established compulsory primary schooling until the age of 13. Then an examination (School Graduate) offered achievers the possibility to attend both academic or vocational schools, whereas under-achievers could only attend vocational schools. In spite of the growing rates of success at School Graduate, and the extension of compulsory schooling until 16 years, the dual system did not even the prestige of both options at all. The 1990 Reform Act makes schooling comprehensive and compulsory until 16. However, repeated delays in its implementation, the current Conservative government manifest intention to curb comprehensivity, budget cuts eventually restricting public supply of secondary comprehensive schools in many localities, as well as the private sector effort to improve facilities and supply all levels in the same school buildings, all these factors have come to invest choice with a renewed social meaning.

Some scholars have convincingly argued that social distances between the

state and private suppliers of public services are particularly high in Southern Europe welfare regimes. Although welfare-mix is a traditional feature of these regimes, as it is in Central Europe, collaboration seems to be much more scarce and partial (Sarasa and Moreno, 1995).

The same trend has been portrayed as the key factor to explain parental low involvement at school. In this view, after Francoism, the former expectations that participation would change schools once they were democratized have been frustrated because of teachers' professional corporatism (Fdez. Enguita, 1993). At first sight a historical overview seems to support the argument: the extension of primary schooling and the growth of private schools were simultaneous in the seventies (Lerena, 1986); later on, public schools gained esteem and attracted a middle-class intake due to the Socialist policy in favour of public schooling in the eighties; but, in the nineties analysts hold a debate on the possibility that students from privileged backgrounds avoid public schools due to a classist fear of comprehensivity. However, does this institutional distance hinder parental involvement of all social groups? This question has not been explicitly posited yet, but some diagnoses seem to have assumed that involvement eventually depends on trust (or mistrust) instead of class and gender hierarchies (Sánchez, 1991; Corraliza, 1991; Fdez. Enguita, 1993; MEC, 1994; CEE, 1995).

In my opinion, a more accurate picture should remind that social groups deal with such an institutional distance from unequal positions. On the one hand, political restrictions hinder involvement on their own, since the Spanish state often fulfils its legitimation needs through rhetoric strategies emphasizing grandiloquent objectives whose implementation is afterwards neglected (Bonal, 1998). The expectation that involvement would democratise schooling was handled in this way. In a sense the argument on mistrust has convincingly shown that political factors also play their role in education. Nevertheless, on the other hand, it would be an overstatement to exclude the influence of social inequalities over parental involvement at school.

It is not evident at all that parental involvement faces such huge institutional obstacles in Spain that class and gender do not impinge on it. Some data suggest the contrary. Thus, participation in school council elections is higher at the infant, primary and special levels (CEE, 1995), where students' autonomy is lower and mothers' responsibility comes to be more direct; besides, participation in parents associations is more likely the higher the class position (Sánchez and Subirats, 1992). Therefore, it is reasonable to ask whether the sociological analysis of school choice can be replicated in a country where educational policy has not legitimated itself with a proclaimed adherence to parentocracy as in Britain (David, 1993b).

Mapping patterns of reasoning

Choice is the outcome of a process where constraints, ideologies and individual reasonings interplay (Bowe et al., 1994; David et al., 1997). Among all these processes my article will focus on reasoning in order to explore the ethnographic patterns of decision-making.

All ethnographic analyses have rejected the market model so far. Actually, that model assumes that decisions operate in relation to discrete orders of preferences, but this hypothesis has never tested. On the contrary, ethnographers have convincingly argued that decision-making is quite more complex than mere rational, instrumental, clear and discrete choice. But, why is not the market model definitely rejected if it contradicts everyday life experience? How can it legitimate educational policy in the midst of crises and contradictions? In my view, the market model keeps legitimating educational policy because it naturalises the social hierarchies that access to public services (as schooling) entails.

Windisch (1992) has devised a typology of reasoning, based on psycho-social research, that spells out the internal processes of these unequal relations. This typology assumes that reasoning is an ongoing process, related to social structure and change as well as inequalities, by means of which a variety of cognitive paradigms are constructed, actualised and continuously modified. One of these cognitive paradigms grounds the social representations of 'rational choice': it distinguishes one's own as well as the others' practices, it leads action toward the subtle work of searching agreements, and it requires structured and multifactorial explanations of social reality. This paradigm can be labelled 'calculation'. Another paradigm sketches quite the opposite picture: it blurs the differences between the own and the others' practices, emphasises withdrawal from negotiation, and refers explanation to deep and unknown causes. This paradigm can be labelled 'reification'.

Actually, although discrete models of choice reduce the complexity of calculation, they reinforce its social prestige. Calculation has been legitimated by the 'homo economicus' stories on capitalist success or fraternal contracts (Pateman, 1988). These stories portray a sexist view of men dominating other men and women, and have constituted a very powerful symbolic resource in modern societies. Furthermore, discrete models of choice condemn reification to irrationality. In spite of their simplification effect, they induce anybody drawing on calculation to think he/she is right, by comparison with anybody using other patterns of reasoning such as reification.

Windisch (1992) states that his cognitive paradigms are used in regular ways by speakers. Although everybody uses all of them, patterns of reasoning can be polarised in some settings. This approach can be projected over the analysis of school choice. Parent-teachers relations are filtered by institutional rules

emphasising individual and discrete actions through interviews, meetings, graduation ceremonies and so on. These contacts compel parents to focus their reasoning on very narrow features of schooling regardless of their general views. Therefore, if class and gender hierarchies can be spelt out under the patterns of reasoning about schooling, and these hierarchies are embedded in polarised distributions of calculation and reification, it is plausible to argue that these hierarchies constitute a crucial process of school choice.

An analysis based on this hypothesis is presented in the following sections. This analysis assumes that schooling is a field of activity where decisions become movements within classed and gendered lines, and it highlights reasoning as a crucial movement in formal settings connecting families and schools. It draws on focused interviews on local schools, since this narrow focus is analogous to the context of most family-school interviews.

The empirical results outline the following picture:

- a) mothers are in charge of family educational decisions,
- b) whereas middle-class mothers often use calculation, working-class mothers often use reification;
- c) teachers almost always use calculation.

Therefore, mothers are the actors in this field of activity from the family side, they justify their choices with different patterns of reasoning whose social prestige is unequal, and they normally face teachers deploying the most prestigious pattern of reasoning.

The former distribution is neither a statistical generalisation nor a mechanistic model; on the contrary, its interpretation should be aware of the continuous interplay between reasonings, broad subjectivities and social constraints. Some comments on its theoretical and empirical grounds can be suggested.

Firstly, in spite of the eventual influence of professional corporatism or institutional distances due to historic particular factors, class and gender structure school choice in Spain as in other countries. Since Ball et al. (1994), Lareau (1995) or David et al. (1997) report similar trends in other countries, the external validity of the analysis is not weak

Secondly, family educational reasonings attribute as high prestige to individualisation as family educational practices have proved to do. Here the distinction between practical and discursive consciousness highlights a crucial remark on school choice. Many researchers have found out that family educational practices contribute more to learning the more similar they are to the elaborate linguistic codes that schools use (Bernstein, 1971, 1975, 1977; Lareau, 1987; Fontaine, 1986; Kellerhals, 1991; Morais, 1992). It is their view that working-class families' practices stressing the influence of contexts over individuals are

held in low esteem because school and family practices become prestigious as far as they rely on negotiations between autonomous individuals having clear preferences in mind. Family discourses on schooling, i.e. family reasonings, seem to be unequal in a similar fashion, since calculation stresses individualisation whereas reification stresses contextual influences. However, reasoning is the outcome of an explicit symbolic work entailing several rationalities. If both practice and reasoning reflect a hierarchy, the role of individualisation in education cannot be only understood as a continuity or discontinuity between families and schools; on the contrary, several rationalities conflict on the importance of individualisation to educate children. The rationale and the prestige of these rationalities should be studied in their own terms.

Thirdly, institutionalised pedagogic rules delimit which voices are legitimate and which voices are not (Bernstein, 1990, 1996). Such a process impinges on both professional and lay reasonings about education. In the same way as performance models can exclude or subordinate competence models from educational policy-making (Bernstein, 1996), narrowly focused reasonings about choice exclude feminine more sophisticated discourses of decision-making such as the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1993) from the schooling arena.

The research design

The present analysis refers to fieldwork in the areas of Barcelona (1994-1997), Castilla-La Mancha and Madrid (1996-1997) in Spain. A sample of interviews with mothers and focus groups with teachers provided first evidence from several schools in the nearby of Barcelona in 1994; afterwards, it has been replicated by other interviews with parent associations members (mainly women) in the same area, Tomelloso (Castilla-La Mancha) and Madrid during 1996 and 1997.

The samples included a variety of women and schools. Mothers became the majority of interviewees in the 1994 sample, which was addressed to 'families', and in the 1996 and 1997 fieldwork, which was concerned with parent associations. They came from a middle-class, a mixed and a working-class public school in the Barcelona urban area in 1994. These schools had not only been selected so as to guarantee social but also pedagogic variety. Thus the middle-class school had won a local fame as a supporter of child-centred pedagogies – it came from the laical private sector who had solicited its admission into the public system after 1985 – the socially mixed school combined rethoric adherence to child-centred principles with subject-centred practices, and the working-class school aimed to articulate child-centred, anti-sexist and pro-labour pedagogies. However, pedagogic orientations did not have a significant effect on mothers'

reasoning, since the class bias was reproduced both in more child-centred and more subject-centred schools. In fieldwork carried out during 1996 and 1997, mothers came from parent associations where middle-class members and values were dominant (the case of Barcelona) as well as where working-class members and values were dominant (the cases of Madrid and Tomelloso). Obviously, the predominance of one or another class milieu did not exclude some variety within each school or association.

In 1994 teachers were sampled after interviewing directors of schools with middle- and working-class intakes and with subject- or child-centred methods. Commonalities on their reasoning were overwhelming. At a second stage, focus groups were held with teachers at the same schools where mothers had been sampled from. On the other hand, some teachers were also interviewed in the 1996-1997 fieldwork while collecting information to assess several pedagogic innovations.¹

When mothers were interviewed, questions focused on the 'barrios' (urban areas) and schools at the locality; but when teachers were interviewed, questions focused on the social characteristics of pupils. The aim of the interviews was incentivating everybody to compare social groups within similar contexts. All interviews pointed at a common focus, which was expected to induce interviewees to make comparisons. Mothers were asked to describe the several areas at their localities and the schools they knew there. Teachers were required to classify students and to justify the criteria they drew on. In both cases there was not any rigid question route, but a wide array of prompts was scheduled in order to lead interviewees to compare areas, schools or students' groups.

As it has been previously mentioned, the external validity of the method relied on the eventual similarity of results with those from other countries; and its internal validity was grounded on the analogy between focused interviews and 'formal' family-school meetings, because both settings induce actors to refer to the same narrow focus.

Transcripts were analysed according to Muchielli's (1974) criteria. The internal structure of discourses was spelt out in terms of the frequency of allusions patterned as calculation or reification. Most interviews showed a clear preference for one or the other pattern of reasoning.

Thus, people from several origins who performed two social roles (teacher and mother) were required to compare schools within similar focuses. They spoke on learning, on pedagogic styles, on schools location, on schools reputation, on academic and personal problems of teachers, and other topics.² Certainly, many factors influenced 'what' they said, and some of these factors may emerge from the very communicational setting of interviews. Furthermore, other techniques would have been more valid to know 'what' mothers actually thought (e.g. focus

groups), as well as other techniques would have been more valid to know 'what' mothers actually did (e.g. observation). Nonetheless, the focused interview and its content analysis found out that the form of speech, besides the content, was a crucial dimension.

Analysis: mothers' and teachers' patterns of reasoning

The analysis of patterns of reasoning has found out that teachers and mothers' speech can converge or diverge regardless of its contents. So far explicit agreement and disagreement have been recorded by many ethnographies, and can be adduced as key factors of conflict or consensus in many episodes, but a latent and common state of affairs, that of agreement on divergent grounds, has not been deeply explored. Windisch (1992) suggests such a possibility, because the same view (e.g. the need of education) can be reasoned using calculation and reification expressing quite different stances.

The distributions drawn by fieldwork in Spain point out that teachers normally use calculation, as well as most middle-class mothers, whereas most working-class mothers use reification. Once again it is important to remind that these distributions have to be contextualised, and that the attribution of types of reasoning to class positions should always be framed within specific focuses of speech. Keeping all these cautions in mind, some discursive traits can be sketched.

Teachers use calculation when they interpret students' or parents' practices, arrange solutions for academic problems or recall several factors to explain something.

a) Teachers are able to re-construct parents' and students' views. For instance, they refer to homework imagining which can be the scene at somebody's home. Then they recall the 'normal' scene in which parents insist on homework, and they point out that is a key contribution to achievement. On the other hand, they are also able to imagine that cultural level, over-work or family instability can produce situations where such a 'normality' collapses.

b) When teachers monitor their action, they are deeply concerned with negotiation. For instance, in the focus groups held in 1994 (when Spanish primary schools still channelled students into academic or vocational secondary education tracks) teachers usually referred to their attempts to look for an agreement with families whose children had not clearly passed the examinations. Then they could advise repetition, they could pass the student but enforce parents to take him/her into vocational education, or they could look for guidance in order to lower parents' exaggerated aspirations or pressure.

c) Teachers draw complex and rich explanations of educational phenomena structuring a diversity of factors. The most salient example here has to do with their accounts of achievement, since in those focus groups they never restricted their reasoning to a single cause but quoted simultaneously a broad array of factors such as maturity, the school method, the school size, the class origin of students, or the strength of teacher collaboration.

Similar discursive traits are also common among mothers using calculation. These mothers also guess what teachers think, look for agreements and elaborate complex explanations.

a) Many mothers are quite good at comparing the others' practices. As a matter of fact, it is mothers using calculation who easily provide a social radiography of localities distinguishing high-, middle- and lower-class areas. In both occasions (1994 and 1996-7) fieldwork calculation has appeared as a pattern of reasoning to reckon the advantages and disadvantages of schools; but it has also been used to understand that teachers face great difficulties when coping with so many children.

b) Some mothers use calculation when negotiating with schools. In 1994 interviews some middle-class mothers told how they negotiated agreements on educational strategies to help problematic children, on bilingual arrangements in Catalonia, on balancing the importance of homework and their views about the need of leisure for children, and so on. Some conflicts were recorded during fieldwork in 1996-7. When calculation became the expression of mothers' strategies in these conflicts, the search of alliances, the setting of negotiation agendas, or the conscious use of indirect pressure through rumour were explicitly quoted.

c) Mothers' explanations of social reality can be as rich as teachers' when calculation provides the framework of reasoning. For instance, in 1994 the views that schools could always do 'something' in spite of teachers' pessimism, that success depended on both academic and psychological factors, or that choice was intrinsically difficult due to the partiality of all available informations, made reference to a broad scope of phenomena to account for school events.

Discourses are very different when mothers use reification. Uncertainty, withdrawal from action and monocausal explanations are quite more important then.

a) Reification blurs the image of 'the other'. Focused interviews recorded many responses expressing a deep uncertainty on the features of local areas or local schools in 1994. In 1996-7 fieldwork asked some work teams to look for the

connection between short stories on everyday life situations and short reports on general social trends. Working-class groups took several sessions to make explicit statements linking both informations, whereas middle-class groups made those statements from the very beginning. The first groups valued the communication of direct experience more than generalisation and statements on strange social actors.

b) Reification does not induce to negotiate but to withdraw from action. For instance, a wait-and-see approach to post-compulsory education was common when mothers used reification in 1994 interviews. Such an attitude seems to be related to their reliance on monocausal explanations.

c) Monocausal explanations are very common among mothers using reification. Some examples are quite clear. In 1994 interviews many mothers considered that learning is a very visible process whose indicators are the age when children write, read or multiply. Other monocausal explanations argued that schools could not change if 'what you have inside' was not right, or that vocational guidance is misleading due to economic crisis.

In summary, mother-teacher interaction can activate analogous or asymmetric patterns of reasoning regardless of the explicit interests of both parties. If mothers and teachers use calculation, each one recognises the other's practices, tends to negotiate agreements in order to solve eventual conflicts, and interprets the situation in base to complex factorial schemata. Under these conditions, although professional knowledge eventually predominates over lay knowledge, mothers' (or fathers' in some occasions) intervention can be relevant for a school. If mothers use reification, however, they are uncertain of other mothers and teachers intentions and strategies, they prefer to stop and see instead of negotiating, and they attribute what happens to deep factors beyond their range of action. Under these conditions, it is quite difficult for mothers (or occasionally fathers) to be influential. Therefore, social structures engendering the representation of families in schools, and ranking common perspectives on education along class lines, embed inequalities at the very core of any message transmitted from schools to families or the other way round.

Discussion: class and gender shape choice

Parental choice is mainly a discourse that has broken into the social variety of subjectivities in order to normalise them. As a consequence, it has strained class and gender social inequalities where students allocation was bureaucratic previously, but these tensions are common to new quasi-markets and to the old

competition between public and private schools. The general regularity is that class and gender eventually shape actual school choice in different ways.

Choice is a movement within a field of activity that is central to industrial and post-industrial societies due to many factors. In this field of activity hegemonic and subordinate positions are established in base to social resources and inter-group comparisons (Bourdieu, 1982). From hegemonic positions social agents can easily start with new movements that other agents will never emulate or will eventually disdain. The final effect will be the reproduction of inequalities (Bourdieu, 1978).

When choice is emphasised by educational policy, middle-class practices toward schooling come to be invested with more prestige. Everything happens as though choosing élite schools was possible for everybody, and some schools try to emulate these élite schools in order to attract high-achievers and upper mobile social strata. However, such an strategy is closer to hypercorrection than it is to true emulation (Ball, 1995).

Similar effects can be reported where school choice is more traditional. For instance, although religious private schools have been more prestigious than public schools in Spain since the nineteenth century, and many people have chosen them in great cities, an internal ranking also distributes prestige among these schools according to the importance of religious orders. Thus, the Jesuits and the Opus Dei own the top schools, Escuelas Pías or La Salle stand at a middle position, and Salesianos have traditionally been in charge of vocational education and training. Salesianos provide more prestigious VET than most public vocational schools, but their intake comes from lower class backgrounds than that for Jesuit schools.

Fieldwork conducted in Spain has also found out a similar internal ranking of public schools. In many Catalan middle towns former laical private schools, which had promoted the Catalan culture during Francoism and applied for a public status after the 1985 Act on the Right to Education, became the local élite schools afterwards. Furthermore, by comparing 1994 and 1996-7 fieldworks in the nearby of Barcelona, it can also be reported that a working-class school deploying an all embracing child-centred and anti-sexist pedagogy had been colonised by middle-class families in 1997. Involvement had simultaneously improved. In Tomelloso (Castilla - La Mancha) fieldwork reports also noticed the local ranking of school prestige. Certainly, the only local private and religious school was reputed as a top prestige one, but public schools at the urban center were also highly valued and made open attempts to display signs of social prestige. Conversely, urban peripheral public schools were attributed a lower prestige, and some of them were 'sunk' schools where marginality seemed the only possible outcome of schooling.

So far Bourdieu's account of educational reproduction in terms of distinction appears to be still valid with reference to school choice. Nonetheless, this portrayal cannot complete the picture. In spite of the distinction-and-reproduction logic, mothers' stances on schooling do not only respond to the emulation logic. The side effect of class and gender hierarchies can be reproduction, but both patterns of reasoning recorded in Spain (and in other countries) have their own rationale. Individualisation is the most prestigious and paradigmatic approach to what is intended by education nowadays, and it reinforces the prestige of middle-classes, who adhere to its tenets spontaneously. However, the working-class departure from such a paradigm by means of reification is not a mere automatic reproduction of hierarchies, since a vast literature proves that domestic educational decisions rely on a variety of popular and congruent philosophies of education (Montandon and Perrenoud, 1994; Ribbens, 1995).

It is not surprising at all that a mother whose social position is not fully integrated casts some doubts on the possibilities of their children to be fully individualised. Although reification does not produce a discourse to make this doubt explicit, it is an everyday life resource to denote the strength of structural constraints. In the eighties, the sociology of education conceptualised this kind of congruent but oppositional perspectives as expressions of resistance. In a sense, mother's doubts and working-class boys' explorations of the low utility of academic credentials in the shopfloor culture (Willis, 1977) are analogous, since inequalities are re-interpreted with reference to class and gender signals, and social reproduction is the side-effect on both occasions. At this point the same debate on the 'romanticisation' of subordinate cultures could be repeated (Walker, 1986).

However, it is my view that the theoretical solution requires another course of argumentation. Although oppositional and congruent perspectives emerge from unequal social relations and can cause the collapse of a specific legitimation of inequality, that only happens sometimes, not necessarily always. Therefore, reification reasoning is neither properly conceptualised as reproduction nor as resistance. At this point, it could be reasonable to conduct a post-modernist analysis conceptualising it as a manifestation of the variety of human subjectivities tacitly handled by power devices. But such an analysis can only explain why some expressions of subjectivity are privileged, whereas others are not, if it goes back to the de-construction of modernity.

A more specific explanation is feasible thanks to Bernstein's theory of the pedagogic device (1990, 1996). To put it in a nutshell, this theory states that education is a sort of communication mediated by distributive, recontextualising and evaluation rules. Distributive rules delimit which social meanings are legitimate and therefore to be included in the education process, recontextualising

rules pack these meanings in the fashion that all schools will have to interpret them, and evaluation rules determine how the learner's socialisation has to be assessed.

School choice is also a part of the pedagogic device. Some distributive rules highlight the salience of economic maximisation, instead of the ethics of care or neighbour solidarity, when deciding which school is appropriate. Other recontextualising rules define what schools are supposed to do with families: either promoting involvement, or blaming the victim, or keeping them away from professional domains. Finally, professional judgements on parents activate rules of evaluation in the same way as teachers' judgements on students do. Besides consensus or conflict, analogy or asymmetry with respect to patterns of reasoning impinge on the final activation of these rules at each occasion. And what is more, the whole device produces a privileging text that continuously remakes the hierarchies between class and gender social characteristics. In conclusion, calculation is attributed a higher prestige than reification by means of a process intrinsic to the very pedagogic communication.

Conclusion

A general account of the school choice social relations can be generalised over different countries. Even though educational policies have not enforced parental choice with the same strength in Britain and Spain, the influence of class and gender over actual choice processes is similar. This conclusion also contributes to the Spanish debate on the importance of the institutional distance between suppliers and takers of public services.

Choice is the outcome of reasoning, as well as other manifestations of subjectivity. Two patterns of reasoning can be distinguished if Windisch's (1992) typology is applied to the analysis of reasoning about school choice in Spain: calculation – with an eventual emphasis on individualisation – and reification – with an eventual emphasis on the influence of the context on individual options. A sociological analysis can grasp gender and class inequalities under the social distributions of these patterns of reasoning, since mothers and not fathers are actually in charge of family representation at school, and working-class mothers often use reification instead of calculation, i.e. the prestigious, professional and middle-class pattern of reasoning.

This finding can be conceptualised either as reproduction or as resistance. None of these theories grasp all its crucial dimensions. Nor does a post-modernist approach highlighting the diversity of human experience. It is Bernstein's theory of the pedagogic device that appears to provide the best conceptualisation,

because it states that mother-teacher interaction activates some evaluation rules in the same way as teacher-student interaction. Social inequalities are then transmitted by the very pedagogic message.

Notes

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² After considering several solutions, direct excerpts from interviews have not been included in the article for two reasons. First of all, translation from colloquial Catalan or Spanish into English was very difficult due to the variety of social and regional markers of speech. And secondly, the scope of issues was so broad, and the institutional frameworks were so fragmentary due to the ongoing and slow educational reform, that it was not possible to outline a general picture without including a long list of quotations. For this reason interviews are only referred to, but not quoted, in the following paragraphs.

Xavier Rambla is a graduate in History (UAB, 1989) and Sociology (UAB, 1991). He obtained his Ph.D. in Sociology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) in 1995. He has been a Lecturer at the UAB and currently he is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Vic (Barcelona: Spain). His research has focused on sociology of education and social policy. Address for correspondence: Universitat de Vic, c/ Sagrada Família, 7, 08500- Vic (Barcelona), Tel. 034-93-886.12.22; Fax. 034-93-889.10.63; e-mail: xavier.rambla@uvic.es

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