on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

segregation, inequalities and discrimination

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The aim of this paper is to show that school segregation not only has an impact on school achievement, but also on more qualitative issues such as the perception of inequalities and the feeling of discrimination. I propose an explanation for why the feeling of being trapped in segregated, 'disreputable' public schools, a feeling which is shared among people from disadvantaged and immigrant backgrounds, as well as parts of the lower-middle class, has a deep impact on social cohesion. We will see how this encourages working-class people to think more in terms of discrimination (segregation as the result of an intentional process) rather than in terms of inequality, calling into question public schools' capacity for guaranteeing equal opportunity. This is another way of analyzing how people facing an unequal context perceive injustice.

Keywords: discrimination, inequalities, segregation, social cohesion

Reacting to Segregation

How do urban and school segregation impact inequality and the perception thereof? Our hypothesis is based on the crucial role of segregation in changing the framework that people use to interpret their own experience and more particularly social hierarchy and difference. The framework becomes less tied to inequalities and more to discrimination. This means that unequal access to resources is not so much interpreted as the result of a non-intentional and objective process, but increasingly as the result of deliberately unfavourable treatment of specific groups compared to others. This process is fundamental in understanding the way that people are going to value and to assess their own social position, as well as the inequalities and constraints related to them. Studying both residential and school segregation is crucial not only to measure and characterize to what extent people are separated more or less voluntarily and the impact this has on school achievement; it is equally fundamental to analyse its impact on more qualitative and symbolic dimensions like social boundaries, respect and the feeling of discrimination (Lamont et al., 2016; Schedd, 2015). It is also important to understand how people react to these processes of rejection and stigmatization, and how these processes deal with social, ethnic, racial and spatial issues.

Self-Segregation and Constrained Segregation

Of course, for an upper-middle class engaged in self-segregation, discrimination operates in a very soft way (Cousin, 2014), and does not necessarily boil down to an unfavourable treatment of undesirable groups. In this case, discrimination might be an unsuitable term. Strictly speaking, looking for 'l'entre-soi' (social closure) is considered an essential condition for social reproduction and for guaranteeing good conditions at school. However, the higher spatial concentration of such privileged groups in increasingly selective areas gives a greater visibility to social and school gaps,

and this creates a more generalized feeling of relegation and downgrading for people excluded from these areas.

At the other extreme, constrained segregation on the part of working people and precarious immigrants tends to be experienced as discrimination. The feeling of being left behind in depressed areas deserted by the middle class – of being degraded, stigmatized and depreciated – creates resentment. In very segregated neighbourhoods, the concentration and the accumulation of experiences linked to social precariousness consolidate the feeling of being deliberately overlooked on the basis of the social and ethnic characteristics of people living here (Lapeyronnie, 2008).

A Distorted Picture of Urban Segregation

A polarized view of large cities has become the hegemonic but distorted picture of urban reality, with significant effects linked to social downgrading associated with the presence of the working class and immigrants. Despite the fact that mixed neighbourhoods remain the more general pattern in the larger Paris metropolitan area (Préteceille, 2006), the notion that the city is made up of wealthy neighbourhoods and poor and depressed public housing projects is still widely held, and this has a deep impact on the entire society (Cousin et al., 2017). It reinforces the upper-middle class in their concern for spatial protection, together with the idea that school and social success can be guaranteed only far away from people from working-class and immigrant backgrounds. Finally, it exacerbates feelings of abandonment and discrimination in already stigmatized neighbourhoods.

Fieldwork done in mixed Parisian suburbs encourages us to strongly consider this vision (Oberti, 2007; Oberti & Rivière, 2014). If it is true that a distorted picture of urban segregation causes tension about school, this does not mean that all social classes make a firm claim for social homogeneity in residential and school contexts, nor that there is a radical rejection of the working class and immigrants. A large fraction of the lower-middle class living in the ring of suburbs closest to Paris express a wish to live in 'regular', mixed neighbourhoods, and to put their children in 'safe' and 'efficient' local schools reflecting the social and ethnic composition of the neighbourhood.

Tension About School

Nevertheless, the wish for 'normality' could be weakened and destabilized with the feeling that the gap is growing between the two extremes of the social hierarchy, with a general impact on the quality and the diversity of school opportunities. This is a decisive point for managing the school system and for understanding why maintaining social diversity seems to be more appreciated by the lower-middle class than adapting schools to specific populations. They expect the local school to guarantee equal opportunity for everybody, and social mixture is perceived as a favourable condition precisely because of social and cultural diversity.

We find the same pattern in many working-class neighbourhoods, where families are ambivalent about implementing specific programmes for disadvantaged schools (Oberti et al., 2009). On the one hand, these families appreciate the effort to take into account the disadvantaged background of the majority of students, but on the other hand, they are anxious about the process of stigmatization and of consolidating the gap separating them from more privileged schools. This is a clear difference with the upper-middle class, who are strongly concerned with maintaining social homogeneity associated with residential and school 'entre-soi' (Cousin, 2014; Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 2007). Desires for high performance in school and spatial distance with working people

and immigrants is a crucial dimension of their relationship with urban space.

The difference in terms of curriculum and tracks between schools plays a substantial role in evaluating and selecting schools. Because of strong competition to obtain the best scores and to attract the 'best' students, school offers are becoming more diverse and more complex from middle school onwards, and this contributes to generating demand as much as to answering it. It mainly contributes to classifying schools according to this offer. Creating a significant gap between schools, the unequal distribution and attractiveness in school offers is central to school competition and contributes to promoting school strategies that are very unequally distributed.

In terms of the schools themselves, the consequence of concentrated disadvantage in terms of cultural capital is that such schools become specialized in hosting these populations. Their challenge is to offer a regular curriculum while responding to a social emergency beyond the school environment. The intensity of school failure and difficulties contribute to weakening the school, which tries to adapt itself to that situation. On the one hand, affirmative action programmes are appreciated; on the other hand, they are perceived as a permanent stigma associated with the working-class- and immigrant-focused specialization of the local school. The rejection of segregation becomes a way of expressing the wish to live in a 'regular neighbourhood' and to have access to a regular school.

A Vision of Social Life in Terms of Discrimination

Social divide is also associated with social violence, which is stronger when, under the amplifying influence of segregation, school becomes less and less perceived as a virtuous institution – one that is naturally affected by multiple inequalities, but regarding which it has the vocation to reduce and overcome – and increasingly as an additional factor of discrimination. Segregation, consolidating a spatial reading of inequalities, contributes to defining the quality of one neighbourhood according to its social and ethnic composition. It is the source of a deep mechanism of collective and personal depreciation/stigmatization, which consolidates a vision of social life in terms of discrimination. When this mechanism extends into the school environment, the principle of meritocracy is weakened, and by extension social cohesion as well, and not only in the poorest areas (Dubet, 2004).

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Recommended Citation

Oberti, M. (2021). Segregation, inequalities and discrimination. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate, 4*(11). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2021.11.6

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