

## **Observations on Education and Late Modernity**

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This function of the school and, more precisely, its contribution to the social integration of individuals within a collectivity, was at the heart of the first sociological reflections on education (Durkheim, 1922). Durkheim assumed that education played a key role in transmitting to each individual a set of (thus shared) norms, values, principles of meaning and action that contribute to the construction of their (collective) identity – and also their relation to others. The below discussion aims to re-examine, in today's world, whether and how education relates to the society in which it evolves. Such reflection seems important at a time when the debates to which terrorist attacks have given rise "have put the spotlight on the role schools should play in the civic and moral education of the whole population, in particular by creating a spirit of openness, critique and defence of liberties" (Alliance Athena 2016).<sup>1</sup> We start out, however, from the premise that such an analysis cannot be made in the terms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To analyse the school's contemporary role in today's global, complex world, one has to take into account the radical changes in contemporary societies and their modes of regulation and integration.

### ***An uncertain world***

These transformations can be grasped, first intuitively, then analytically, by contrasting the present situation with that of Durkheim's time. A first difference, central for our topic, should be foregrounded: in Durkheim's time, the school could count on a number of "certainties" that were "taken for granted," as to, for example, what was to be expected from a "good" pupil or a "good" teacher, the roles that each had to play, the values the teacher should defend, transmit, and even embody (Van Haecht 1985), the different types of teaching appropriate for different categories of pupils, etc. (Grootaers 1995). Possession of such "certainties" naturally settles a whole series of problems before they even arise, and provides a stable normative framework to organise the process of social integration of individuals by the school. Now these normative references and many others besides are shattered (Derouet 1992; Dubet 2002). The answers are no longer given. What can be expected of a pupil or a teacher? What values should be championed? What objectives should be pursued – equity or efficiency of the system, development of the pupils, their future employability, critical faculties, technical knowledge, creativity, rigour, adaptability? There are many possible answers, but none of them is any longer self-evident. Even the fundamental notion of the "school form" (Vincent 1994), which had been thought very stable, now has less solid normative grounding: the fundamental distinctions it made between different roles (teacher / pupil), specific times (learning / work time) and distinct places (in school / outside of school; in classroom / outside of classroom) are no longer as obvious as they once were.

The question obviously arises: how did the situation evolve in this way? To answer it, we must point to another important evolution, parallel to the first: the quantity, quality and

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<sup>1</sup> In its communication dated 26.8.2015, the European Commission stated that "the tragic outbursts of violent extremism at the start of 2015 sent a reminder that education and training have an important role in fostering inclusion and equality, cultivating mutual respect and embedding fundamental values in an open and democratic society" (EC 2015: 2).

diversity of knowledge about education are much greater now than in the past. The two observations are not unrelated (we have at the same time much less certainty and much more knowledge) and in fact form the two faces of a paradox typical of modernity: gains in knowledge systematically produce new zones of ignorance and indeterminacy: “What was previously accepted as self-evident and, as it were, ‘life-worldly’ is now made visible as a peculiarity of a certain way of observing” (Luhmann 2002: 59, see also Luhmann 1995). The paradox goes far beyond the field of education. It fundamentally characterises the state of modernity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: never before has a society had so much knowledge in so many domains and sub-domains, never before has a society been so aware of facing uncertainties (Beck 1992, 2009), especially as regards its future (Luhmann 1998 ; Rosa 2010). The proliferation of uncertainties affects all the major institutions of modernity. While science has evolved by multiplying, subdividing, fragmenting itself and abandoning any ambition of a unified view of the real (Abbott 2001), “culture” too is clearly much more fragmented, multiple, proliferating and deterritorialised now than in the past; everyone, and more especially any young person, is now confronted with a heterogeneous, unordered, unhierarchised cultural offer, produced in contexts and by groups other than his or her own (Sarup 1996, Clam 2003). These developments clearly transform the conditions in which the process of social and cultural integration of the younger generations takes place and the role school education can play in it.

These changes can be understood analytically in the following way. If, for a time, the school had relatively established normative references, this was because it was bound up with (non-educational) institutions which provided these references for it (Dubet 2002). First there was religion and then the nation state, its social structure and its institutions (science, culture, the economy, the family, etc.). In other words, the school was, for more than a century, able to shape individuals relatively adjusted to society (social integration) only because it was itself structurally coupled, in the framework of the nation state (systemic integration), with a social structure, a political system, an economic system, a legal system, a culture, established ways of life and a certain conception of living together which – even in a divided societal context like that of Belgium – provided the necessary references for its work of socialisation (Gellner and Breuilly, 1988).<sup>2</sup> These structural couplings bound the systems together and so limited the scope of what was normatively possible. They provided education with external (i.e. non educational) points of references which covered up the fundamental indeterminacy (the paradox) of education (after all, why teach this rather than that?; why teach something instead of nothing?). It was because it was anchored in a societal context that school could count on an “institutional programme” (Dubet 2002) that supplied self-evident answers. The greater or lesser degree of systemic integration thus appears as linked to the degree of stability of the norms mobilised in the process of social integration, which means that a change in the modalities of systemic integration inevitably affects the conditions of social integration (Archer, 1996).

Now what fundamentally characterises the present situation is that the “structural couplings” (Luhmann 2012) that were established in the golden age of the nation states are

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<sup>2</sup> It is clear in the Belgian context that the very form of the educational system, with its networks, its organising powers, its communities, corresponded to the complexity of the Belgian social and political system: by making room for its different fractions, inculcating in the new generations knowledge and values common to the whole of society and/or their (linguistic, philosophical) community, the school thus served as a support for societal integration (including the reproduction of its philosophical, linguistic and social divisions). The school and the other major institutions were coupled together and placed in the service of the society. They moulded themselves to its form and values (not without tensions, battles and “wars” over schooling). On these questions, see Bastenier 1998.

progressively unravelling. This is what Dubet<sup>3</sup> emphasises when he refers to the “growing dissociation” or “progressive separation of what the very idea of a [national] society strove to integrate: a market, a culture, and institutions” (Dubet 2005, n.p.). For a long time nation states did indeed play a central role in the systemic integration of modern societies (Dubet 2014; Gellner and Breuilly 2008). Partially decoupled from its national context, each functional system is now tending to globalise itself (Teubner 1996, Kjaer 2010; Holzer et al. 2014). It then links up communicatively with other actors situated in other contexts but engaged in the same functional activity. This groundswell of globalisation leads each functional system to turn ever more towards its own processes and its own outputs (Vanderstraeten 2004; Jessop 1990). It becomes more technical, more complex, while at the same time losing its normative points of references. The movement that is emerging, in part imperceptibly, in the background, is that of the shift from a world organised into nation states (putting the “national community” and its values at the centre) to a world organised into different domains (centred on specific reference problems, including education, and on the endless pursuit of more efficient solutions to them).

In this context, the social order is no longer so much based on shared values but much more on various conventions and coordination mechanisms which require no normative consensus in order to function: money, qualifications, contracts, technical frames of reference and standards are all means which, in a given domain, enable people to coordinate with one another without a real normative consensus. The problem of the social integration of individuals within a collectivity unfolds in this context marked by functional differentiation, the rise of self-referentiality, the pursuit of efficiency and the creation of deterritorialised mechanisms for technical, impersonal coordination.

These transformations make it possible to understand a number of difficulties relating to social integration, and in particular to the school’s role in it. The school can no longer appeal to a shared vision of society as a basis for the process of social integration (Derouet, 2000). The few works that currently explicitly raise the question of the school’s contribution to the social integration of the rising generations stress the growing difficulty or even inability of today’s schools to implement an “institutional programme” (Dubet, 2002) of socialisation. It is clear that this indeterminacy radically changes the parameters of education and socialisation. How are judgements to be made when the normative references become unstable and contingent? Is the capacity to cope with uncertainties itself becoming the only possible stable reference? Should different values be taught to different publics? Is it up to the publics or organisations, and no longer the institutions, to determine the values and models that they want to prioritise?

The normative and the cognitive entertain a complex relationship: if the normative guidelines that were taken for granted are disappearing, this certainly does not mean that we are moving towards a world without norms. The development of normative indeterminacy (and therefore, in fact, of a non-coordinated plurality of norms on the societal scale) has as its immediate corollary a new need to make choices, establish orientations, i.e. reconstruct norms, on scales mostly other than that of the nation state. With the decline of the institutional programme, a space of possibilities has opened up that

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<sup>3</sup> Dubet writes as follows: “To put it another way, we are experiencing the exhaustion of the idea of society as the [systemic] integration of an economy, a culture and a political sovereignty – an integration necessary for the establishment of continuity between the actors’ subjectivity and the objectivity of their positions and, therefore, for the interlocking from which the individual arises [integration social]. In fact, this conception could only prevail insofar as the society was, in reality, the modern, democratic, industrial social formation (separated from religion, made up of equals, with a complex division of labour). But this ensemble formed a society within a national state” (Dubet 2005, n.p.)

continuously demands to be reduced. But because the norms are no longer given by the institutional context, they have to be determined and constructed. Choices have to be made, bearings established, answers provided. Where the normative references were once taken for granted and could serve as stable, invisible anchorage points for the process of education and socialisation, they now, at least for the external observer, take the form of orientations taken up within a space of possibilities. Unless performance itself is made a norm – and many people quite naturally do so in this context marked by self-referentiality (Ball 2000 and 2012; Maroy 2008) – the challenge for the actors is to connect education with values, projects, points of reference, in order to reconstruct universes of reasonable meanings.

### ***Education as a global problem***

The next step in our discussion starts out from the paradoxical situation described above (more and more knowledge, fewer and fewer certainties) and aims to describe its consequences at the level of educational systems: how does “the system” cope with a plethora of knowledge and a lack of certainties? How is the resulting high level of complexity reduced? How do people try to establish new certainties?

This situation, which, on the systemic scale, is one of crisis (how does one know what is to be done?) has the clear consequence of making education a *problem* (instead of an institution) that is posed on a *global* scale and for which solutions can / must be sought, everywhere in the world and at every moment. Normative indeterminacy and the ensuing need to seek solutions give rise to intense “knowledge work”: numerous devices are being set up to observe educational systems and operators on an ever more global scale. This corresponds, in the educational system, to the observation made by Esposito in her remarkable analysis of the economic system: “in times of high uncertainty attention tends to shift [...]: one observes what others do rather than how things are” (Esposito 2013: 8). These devices are developed and promoted by specific bodies which manage to constitute themselves as reference points precisely by channelling and crystallising global communication about education: this is the case with the OECD (Henry et al. 2001: 90), for example, and, increasingly, the EU (Grek 2010), especially in the contexts of the countries of the “North,” and UNESCO (Verger 2016) or the World Bank (Molla 2014) for the countries of the “South.”<sup>4</sup>

This capacity to channel and crystallise the global flow of communication about education results from several factors. Beyond their ability to mobilise powerful resources – economic, symbolic (prestige), media and scientific – (Mangez and Hilgers 2012), the strength of these governance bodies (distinguishing them from government bodies) stems not from political power (they often have none) but rather from their capacity to constitute themselves as “macro-observers”<sup>5</sup> of educational systems on an international, even global scale through knowledge work that gives a central role to quantification procedures (Rose 1991; Grek 2009; Ozga 2009; Werron 2015; Hartong 2016), to the identification of good practices or exemplary cases, and to processes of comparison (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003; Carvalho

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<sup>4</sup> Some for-profit companies (which often describe themselves as “learning companies,” such as Pearsons or McKinsey (Hogan et al. 2016) themselves play a role of macro-observers: <https://www.pearson.com> and <http://mckinseysociety.com/topics/education/>

<sup>5</sup> In conceptual terms, the idea of the macro-observer, the “evaluating third party,” developed by Rosanvallon (2006), or that of “universalised third parties” who participate in the world “not by acting but by observing,” developed by Werron (2015), make it possible to designate these agencies (Mangez and Cattonar 2011), and at the same time to highlight the marginalisation of nation states.

2012; Freeman and Mangez 2013). In this way, and even when they are not formally sites of political decision-making (although government members are often involved in them, alongside other actors), these governance bodies can exert an undeniable influence on education. It is as if educational systems had to a large extent slipped out the control of their traditional governors (Charlier and Croché 2005).

### ***Self-referentiality***

In the context of a global (or international) governance of education, and under the scrutiny of these macro-observers, the aim of educational managers often comes down to improving their position in the international comparisons and rankings. Education seems to set itself in a dynamic increasingly focussed on its own performances. The outputs of the system become inputs for subsequent iterations of the system in a self-sustaining dynamic (Luhmann 1997): the system is guided by the pursuit of improvement of its own results.<sup>6</sup> A form of self-referentiality is at work: the aim is always to take the outputs of the system (in the form of numerical data or “best practices”) as inputs for its next iterations (cf. also Simons 2014).

Even if they are presented as strictly cognitive, the observations made by these governance agencies and the lessons (recommendations) they draw from them are not normatively neutral (Muller 2000; Surel 2000). Their supposedly cognitive work installs a general orientation towards “performances” and “results,” of which the switch from teaching to learning (Biesta 2010), the centrality of “learning outcomes” or the omnipresence of a semantics of “quality” (Ozga 2008) are very characteristic manifestations. This does not mean that these bodies are only interested in the question of the effectiveness of learning and are oblivious to any other imperative: in fact they are capable of absorbing and integrating different types of objectives, including questions of equity or social justice, questions of social inclusion, or topics such as the development of critical faculties, creativity or enterprise, or, more recently, in the framework of an Open Method of Coordination in education, the prevention of radicalisation (European Commission 2016). While these bodies are capable of taking account of a diversity of issues in their reflection, they are nonetheless characterised by the fact that they are always interested in them through the (inevitably reductive) prism of learning performances. Whether the concern is equity or effectiveness, development of critical thinking or enterprise, or even preventing radicalisation, etc., the aim is always to identify best practices and above all to (try to) measure the efforts and performances of educational systems or operators. So, every new issue, question or value seems capable of being integrated and “absorbed” in a system of performance measurement. Unlike educational organizations which can / must make choices in favour of one or another normative orientation (which contributes to the fragmentation of the field), the governance bodies seem able to integrate multiple imperatives (equity *and* efficiency, critical thinking *and* enterprise, formal *and* informal learning, school-age learning *and* life-long learning, etc.), filtering them endlessly through a self-referential focus that makes them take the (inevitably reductive) *form* of performances. Normative indeterminacy (too little certainty, too many possibilities) functions here as a resource that offers the “system” multiple opportunities for **expansion** through absorption-reduction of new elements.

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<sup>6</sup> In the French-speaking Community of Belgium, the initial ideas and very terminology “pact for educational excellence” illustrate this dynamic clearly: the aim was to “strengthen quality” at all levels (apprenticeship, educational offer, teacher training, governance of the system).

### **Governance and its actors**

Given these developments, an important question that arises is that of the place of the organized actors and, more precisely, their capacity to act on the global system of the governance of education that is now taking shape. What is the place of the actors: can they influence the governance of education? How and under what conditions? Is the system capable of reproducing itself independently of their will? Finally, how does participation in the bodies of governance in turn affect and transform them?

Various actors are involved in the agencies of governance. One of the particularities of the context of the European governance of education is that, alongside experts and representatives of national education systems, one finds a series of stakeholders including various interest groups (IGs) and a number of social and trade-union movements (SMs) active in the area of education on an international scale. The latter are indeed increasingly organising themselves internationally: "Civil society coalitions are re-scaling their activity and creating more links at the international level, in parallel to the increasing role of international organisations in the framing of national education policies" (Verger and Novelli 2012: 5).

Study of the *participation* of these actors (IGs and SMs) in European governance makes it possible to deal with a double problem: what effects does the mere fact of entering into the system of governance and bringing in their preoccupations and their normative orientations (their values) have on the system of governance (1) and on themselves (2)? It is at the level of social movements and some interest groups that efforts are made to try to combat the self-referential tendencies that, as we have suggested, predominate in these bodies and generally lead them to make performance improvement the only possible normative horizon. By reposing the question of values and meaning in education, IGs and SMs try to interrupt the dynamic through which governance leads educational systems to use their results alone as points of reference to determine their future orientations (Todd 2016). Such governance bodies often show a considerable capacity to absorb and take over the demands and critiques addressed to them. The system seems to produce its own logic autopoietically (Luhmann 1995), it seems able to feed on critiques, literally to use them to pursue its own development (expansion), to absorb values and ideas, even critiques, by "trans-forming" them into good practices, recommendations and indicators. The role of actors then seems reduced to that of feeding the system with new topics, new problems, new goals, which are continuously being absorbed by the system of governance through the (inevitably reductive) self-referential prism of learning performances.

Governance bodies have a high capacity to absorb the contributions made to them (including critical ones), they positively feed on them to develop themselves even further and this absorption capacity transforms these elements at the same time as it integrates them. Such a process may then be perceived by the participants as denaturing or corrupting the essential part of their preoccupations. The risk for these actors is then they will have a sense of not being heard or being instrumentalised and will come to question the usefulness of their participation in the OMC, which could in turn impact on the legitimacy of the process.

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