A sociological contextual perspective on educational inequalities: from disadvantaged schools to elite higher education institutions

Agnes van Zanten

Center for Research on Social Inequalities

Sciences Po

Paris, France

I.

- A research trajectory: from ZEP to CEP

Research on the different social classes in diverse local contexts and at various stages of the educational system

	Primary/ Secondary education	Secondary education	Higher education
Lower-class families and schools in rural-urban environments	**1982-1987** Research on a rural and urban ZEP **1988-1998** Research on schools in a district of the Parisian periphery		
Middle-class and upper-class families in contrasting cities of the Parisian region		**1999-2006** Research on middle and upper-class families' choices of lower-secondary schools in the Parisian region	
Elites + all other classes in Paris and diverse rural and urban contexts in France			**2006-2014** Research on elites in HE in the Parisian region **2012-2022** Research on CEP students in secondary and HE

II.

- **A theoretical framework: contexts, dispositions, actions**

An interactive model
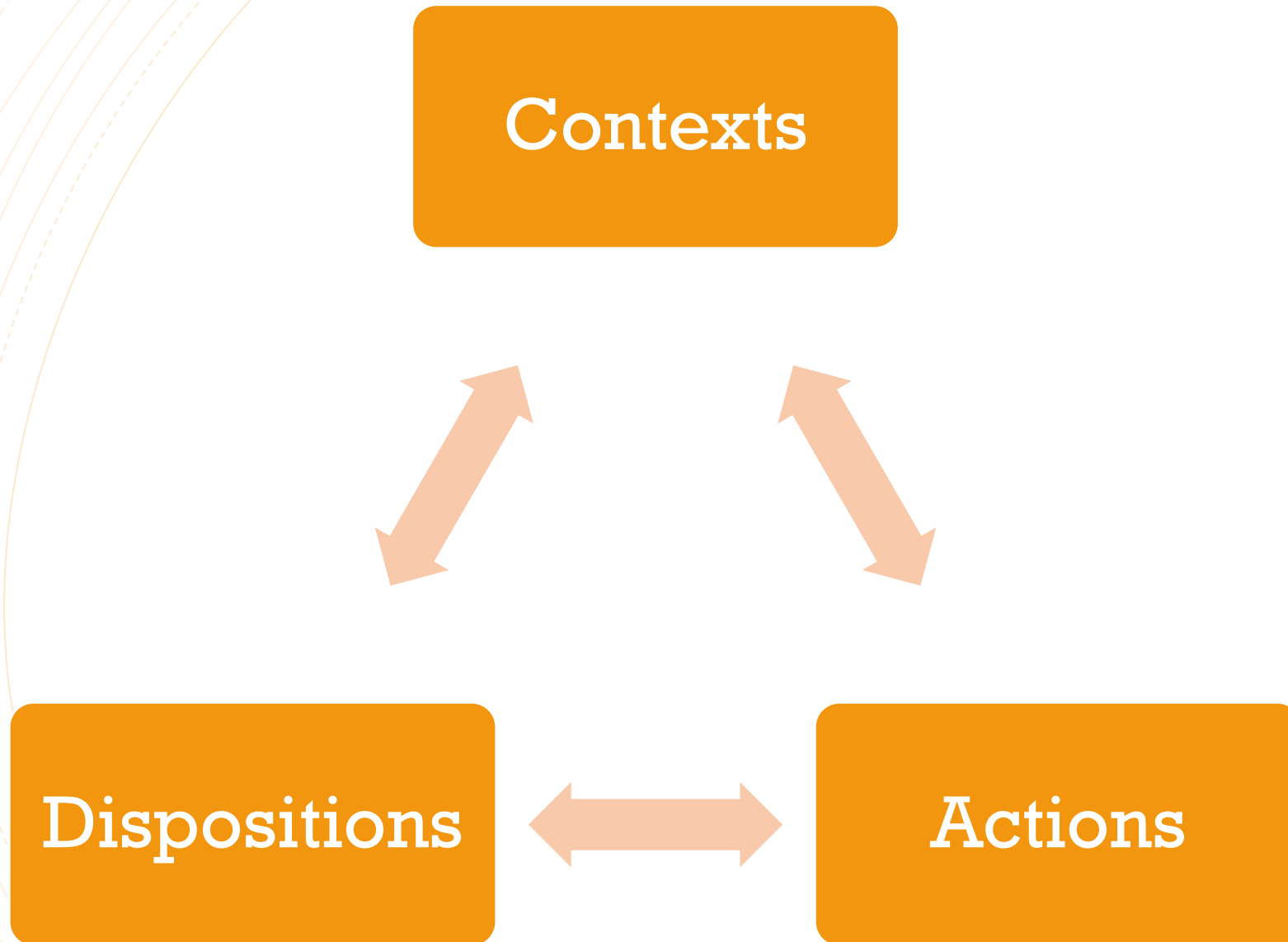
CONTEXTS

- The social sciences interpret individual and collective action in relation to specific contexts (historical, geographical, institutional…) (Tilly, 2002)

- Sociologists have tended to focus either on very large, macro contexts referred to by concepts such as structure (Marxist theory) or field (Bourdieu) or to very small ones such as situations in interactionist theory. My own perspective is "meso". I focus on medium-size configurations of interdependent relations in which actors are embedded that can be empirically analyzed by the researcher (i.e. a city, a school, a HEI)

- Conceived in this way, contexts can be formal organizations (such as a firm) or informal groups (a group of peers that meet regularly on the street) and exert their influence in a variety of ways (i.e. formal or informal rituals, rules, expectations…)

- As many sociologists of education, I have mostly focused on two key educational contexts, families and schools, while also paying attention to the role of spatial configurations such as small towns, cities, neighborhoods.

- Contrary to many of them, I consider that is is important to focus not only on how these contexts intervene in the primary socialization of children but in their secondary socializations as well

DISPOSITIONS

- I borrow the concept of « dispositions » from Lahire (2002), who has himself been inspired by Bourdieu's (1996) concept of habitus, to refer to:
  - A relatively coherent set of attitudes and practices
  - Transmitted (consciously or unconsciously) by actors, frequently "significant others" (parents, siblings, teachers, best friends…)
  - In contexts characterized by specific forms of interdependence between actors
  - During a relatively long period of time
  - That can be homogeneous or heterogeneous depending on variations in the dispositions of the actors involved in the transmission process within each context or across contexts (i.e. parents within different social trajectories, parents and teachers holding different expectations…)
  - That can potentially, but not necessarily, be transposed to other contexts (a key question in the study of social mobility)

ACTIONS

- The concept of dispositions refers to inclinations that have been incorporated frequently unconsciously and over long periods of time although actors, including young children, are not passive recipients of ideas, values, norms, but can resist them, make choices among them and creatively combine them.

- The concept of actions refers instead to deliberate practices, influenced by dispositions, but showing actors' sense of agency as they try to overcome obstacles and seize opportunities in the contexts in which they evolve.

- Actions suppose individuals' will but also the mobilization of different types of capitals (economic, cultural and social) (Bourdieu, 1973), which are unequally distributed across social classes and individuals.

TRANSITIONS

- I study transitions in reference to the two main functions of organizations dealing with people: people-processing and people-changing (Hasenfeld, 1972)

- People-processing refers to the circulation of people within and between organizations and other types of contexts and the changes of status related to this circulation: from one track to another, from a public to a private school, from secondary to higher education, from HE to the labor market

- People-changing refers to the transformation of dispositions associated with different stages within and between organizations and contexts: from superficial mastery of certain knowledge of practices, to expertise

III.

- A qualitative methodology: ethnography and biography

The contribution of two complementary methods

- Ethnographic fieldwork
  - Focus on the *synchronic* interactions of contexts, dispositions and actions
    - Objective: through observations
    - Subjective : through interviews
- Documentary and biographical research:
  - Focus on the *diachronic* interactions between contexts, dispositions and actions
    - Objective: through documentary work
    - Subjective: through biographical interviews

Long-term, in-depth ethnographic field work (1)

- Observations of places, activities, events and people relevant to the study involving a careful reflection about:

  - Those activities that being recurrent, need recurrent observations (i.e class teaching), and those that being unique or irregular can be observed only once or a few times (i.e open doors events)

  - The possibilities and relative advantages of « neutral » observations (i.e. where there is a coincidence between the researcher's role and its role in the social situation) and participant observations (adoption of a specific role in the field)

  - The best way of recording places, people, events, conversations including fieldnotes, oral recordings, photos and videos

Long-term, in-depth ethnographic field work (2)

- In-depth interviews with all the actors involved (ex. for a study of secondary education members of the administration, principals, teachers, other school personnel, students, parents…) involving a careful reflection:

  - On sampling, to constitute interview groups that reflect the local diversity in terms of the dimensions deemed most important for the study (frequently age, gender, social class, ethnoracial background…)

  - On the content of the interviews and interview strategies to ensure both depth and comparability

  - On interview conditions (profile of the interviewer, place and duration of the interview, one or several interviewees at the time) to ensure participation and good data

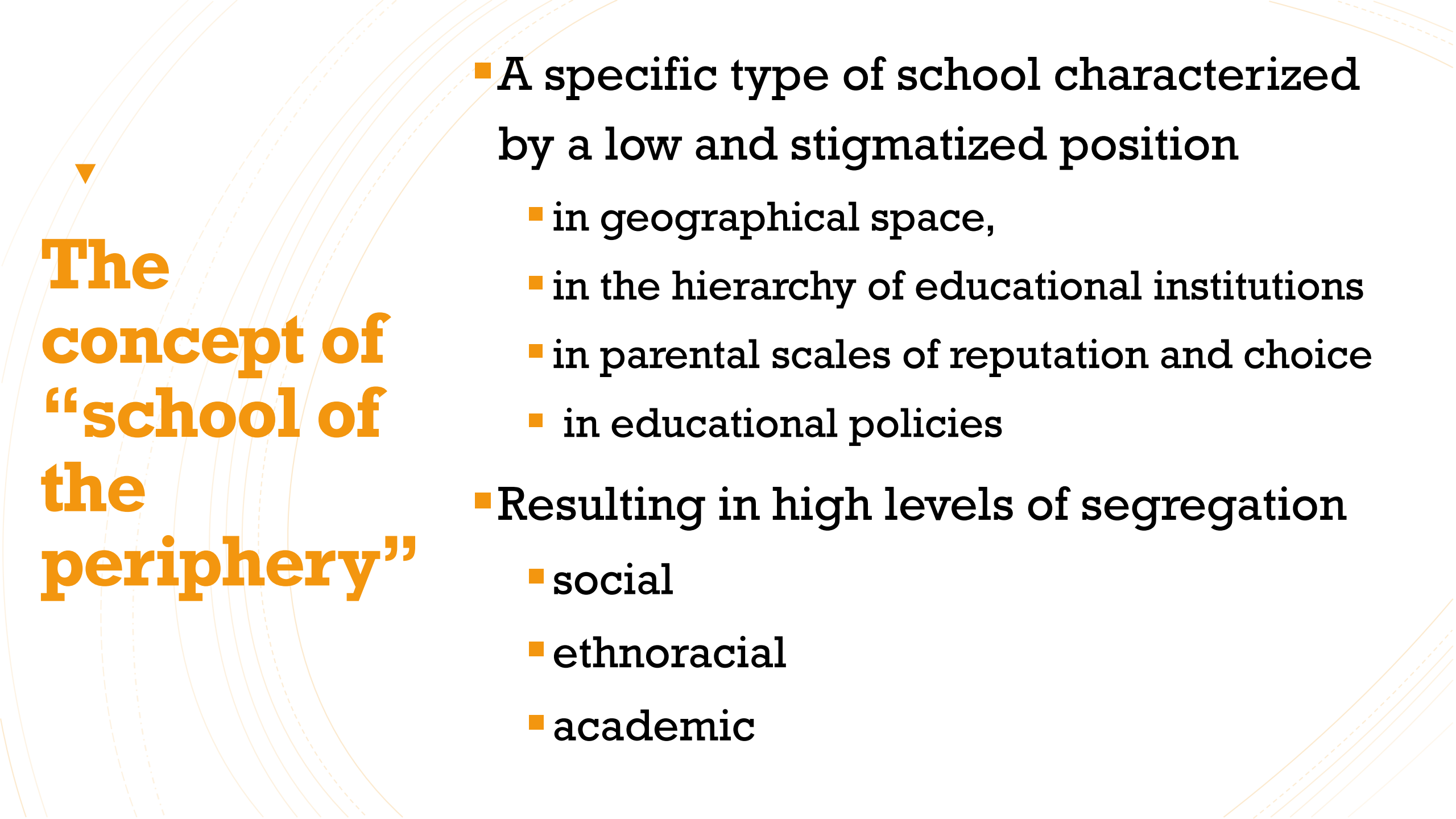# Documentary and biographical research

- Documentary work (mostly objective data but presence of subjective dimensions as well)
  - On administrative data on cities, housing and schools
  - On scientific, journalist, biographical or partly fictional frequently written accounts of past events and processes
- Biographical interviews (strongly intertwined objective and subjective elements):
  - Focus on the descriptions of contexts, dispositions and actions at different periods
  - Focus on sequences of contexts, dispositions and actions and transitions between them, some of them, but not all can be "turning points"

Building comprehensive, "grounded" sociological interpretations

- Inductive analysis of research data
    - To isolate key themes, ideas, values, actions, expressions
    - To compare themes, ideas, values, actions across observations, interviews, documents
    - To establish links between these elements and objective characteristics of periods, contexts, people
- Dialogue between the initial theoretical framework and inductive interpretations to provide additional empirical support, enrich existing concepts and propositions or propose new ones

IV.

- **Reproduction: Young people « stuck » at the periphery**

The concept of "school of the periphery"

- A specific type of school characterized by a low and stigmatized position
  - in geographical space,
  - in the hierarchy of educational institutions
  - in parental scales of reputation and choice
  - in educational policies
- Resulting in high levels of segregation
  - social
  - ethnoracial
  - academic

The external construction of the "school of the periphery"

- Policies
  - Urban and housing policies favoring the aggregation of the wealthy and the segregation of the poor
  - School policies favoring the aggregation of academically successful students and the segregation of those experiencing learning difficulties
  - Ineffective territorial « positive discrimination » policies, frequently reinforcing rather than reducing the segregation and stigmatization of peripherical areas and schools

- Institutional dynamics
  - Status hierarchies between schools related to their location, social composition and academic results
  - Unfair competition between them for the « best » students

- Parental strategies
  - Avoidance of peripherical schools through residential strategies, choice of the private sector or choice of another public school
  - « Colonization » of peripherical schools by middle-class parents, frequently to serve the interests of their own children and not the common good

The internal construction of the "school of the periphery"

- Principals' strategies to improve the school image, retain the best students and, if possible, attract new ones and be well-evaluated by educational authorities
  - Focus on the publicization of educational projects and events
  - Use of educational options and grouping arrangements to retain the best students while producing internal segregation
  - Focus on discipline and the maintenance of a strict school order
- Teacher strategies
  - Horizontal mobility between schools to improve their work conditions and professional satisfactions + disengagement through involvement in other activities, absenteeism
  - Adaptation of educational programs, pedagogy and evaluation to students' supposed low intellectual capacity and/or motivation together with the development of a "humanitarian" work ethic
  - Strong focus on "copying" strategies in classrooms ranging from "fraternization" to frequent collective punishment

Students as both agents and victims of the "school of the periphery"

- Many, especially boys, torn between the demands of the school and the attraction of the neighborhood, the later leading to absenteeism, drop out or engagement in deviant activities.

- Difficulty, because of personal reasons but also because of teachers' adaptative pedagogical strategies and difficulties in maintaining discipline, to remain engaged in learning and not to engage in disruptive activities

- Negative reactions to bad grades and allocation to stigmatized classes and tracks, frequently perceived as acts of discrimination by students from ethnoracial minorities

V.

- **Transformation : Young people moving up from the margins to the top**

An institutional opportunity for a selected few

A radical "engineered" mobility

- Sciences Po: a prestigious HEI offering 5-year master courses in seven graduate schools : (the School of Public Affairs, the Paris School of International Affairs, the School of Management and Innovation, the Law School, the Urban School, the School of Journalism, and the School of Research)

- Launched an ambitious positive discrimination scheme called *conventions éducation prioritaire* (CEP) in 2001 which had concerned 2,262 young people by 2020.

- The scheme involved a two-step selection process.
  - First, students from disadvantaged *lycées* [upper secondary schools] selected as Sciences Po 'partner schools' (7 in 2001, 106 in 2020) were trained, in special workshops, to prepare and defend before a school selection panel a comprehensive written press report on a topical issue in the media.
  - Second, those students deemed 'admissible' by the local panels went on to attend an interview with a Sciences Po admissions panel composed of one member of the administration,

Mobility for the not « too disadvantaged »

- The scheme was intended to increase the proportion of disadvantaged and 'diverse' students admitted.

- However, its initial choices and progressive changes instead produced a quite heterogeneous group of CEP students :
  - First, the scheme targeted *lycées généraux et technologiques* offering academic and technological *baccalauréat* tracks (LGT) located in disadvantaged areas but that in fact enrolled a significant proportion of white middle-class and upper-class students
  - Secondly, most *lycées* chose a policy of open enrolment in the CEP workshops, which encouraged self-elimination among students, while a minority only encouraged those with very good academic records to apply or only declared these students admissible.
  - The latter tendency became widespread around 2012 when the Sciences Po' scheme underwent an 'academic turn' and admissions panels began giving greater weight to CEP candidates' school records and academic abilities, rather than to more contextual and wider definitions of merit and potential.

Moving to the top: spatial contexts and families

Spatial and family contextual obstacles

- Local areas characterized by strong levels of social and, in many cases, ethnoracial segregation and social stigmatization

- Children raised in social institutions or, more frequently in single parents' families

- Parents with low levels of economic capital reducing their capacity to move out of segregated and stigmatized areas

- Parents with low-levels of cultural capital : limited mastery of the French language and, more frequently, low levels of formal education, limited cultural practices

- Parents with low levels of social capital as well : limited contacts with neighbours, limited contacts outside the local area

- Bad examples from older brothers or sisters having failed at school or followed low mobility school tracks or, in a limited number of cases, engaged in deviant activities

Spatial contextual resources

- Spatial "positional capital":
  - Living in non strongly stigmatized rural areas or urban neighborhoods
  - Not living in social housing or in social housing less stigmatized due to a smaller size and comprising buildings and apartments of better material quality
  - Living in urban areas, especially those located in the Parisian "red belt" (previously or still Communist or Socialist cities) characterized by ambitious social and cultural local policies and services

- Spatial "situational capital":
  - Families who "landed" without knowing it in advance in less disadvantaged areas or who were able to choose to move to "richer" spatial areas
  - Youngsters who lived in wealthier and less stigmatized areas due to sojourns with wealthier parents in divorced or separated families

Family contextual resources

- Family structures favoring mobility:
  - Families with an only child
  - Families with strong examples of success of older children and solidarity practices between them and younger ones
  - Single mothers strongly investing their children's education
  - "Old" fathers, already retired, spending time with children

- Small but useful volumes of cultural and social capital:
  - Frequent cases of families with a heterogenous cultural capital (one parent with a HE degree and the other not)
  - Also many cases of not highly educated parents, notably mothers, who were successful at school but forced to stop for economic or cultural reasons
  - Families with at least one parent with different types of informal cultural capital
  - Members of the extended family with higher educational degrees or informal cultural capital

Family educational strategies

At home and in the neighborhood:

- Frequent discussions in the family
- Encouragement of reading (going to the public library, buying books)
- Encouragement of informal and formal cultural practices (music, painting, activities proposed by municipalities

Towards schools:

- High educational ambitions
- Follow up of homework
- Frequent contacts with teachers and participation in school activities and meetings, less frequently in parents' associations
- And very important, constant choosing, depending on resources and opportunities, of less segregated and more demanding schools, options and tracks

Moving to the top: school contexts

School obstacles

- Schools with high levels of social and frequently ethnoracial segregation
- Schools with bad academic results and academic reputation
- Strong teacher mobility and sometimes absenteeism
- Teachers with low expectations and low levels of engagement
- « Disturbed » schools and classroom contexts

School resources & strategies

- Due to schools' ZEP or other positive discrimination policy status, and emphasis on bringing "excellence" to these schools, greater number of optional classes (bilingual, specializing in music or dance or on sports)

- In the Parisian periphery in particular, high numbers of highly qualified, young teachers

- Teachers' keen to "distinguish" and "push" the best students, notably by providing advice on choice of options & tracks

- Some motivated classmates serving as "role models" and "mentors"

Moving to the top: students

Students' ambitions, dispositions & strategies

- High ambitions from the start or appearing in lower-secondary or upper-secondary

- High motivation for studies/love of school from the start or appearing later on

- High autonomy in the realization of school tasks

- Acceptance of school discipline, especially by girls, or minor deviant behavior, especially among boys

- Acceptance of being considered a « geek » and being marginalized or compensation of this status by being friendly with others

- Choice of the "best" tracks and options

Tentative conclusions

- In order to examine both primary and secondary educational socializations as well as individuals' educational trajectories, need to:
  - Develop a solid theoretical framework emphasizing the role of context, dispositions and actions and relevant research approaches, methods and techniques to study them
  - Pay careful attention:
    - To the cumulative dimensions at work in certain contexts such as peripherical areas and schools or elite ones
    - But also to subtle differences between and within contexts
  - Examine:
    - How contexts generate certain dispositions and how the concentration of certain dispositions help reproduce or change contexts intentionally or unintetionnally
    - How contexts provide both obstacles and opportunities (objectively and subjectively) for human action, both individual and collective that in turn fosters continuity or change