**school failure**

**The notion of school failure**

The definition adopted for school failure is that proposed in the 70s by Isambert-Jamati, to account for a phenomenon linked to the massification of the French education system: "the student who fails is the one who has not acquired, in the time allotted by the school, the new skills provided for by the programs".

In the sociology of education, two models of analysis are confronted:

**Culturalist approach:** the cause of failure is sought in the family environment.

**Conflictualist approach**: explanation of failure through the analysis of class relations (conflicts).

**1) The culturalist approach:**

The culturalist approach seeks the links between parents' educational practice and academic success, in order to establish family profiles that are more or less conducive to failure.

**A. Problems**

* Many contradictions between the different culturalist researches.
* The observed correlations do not make it possible to distinguish between causes and consequences (family climate and school failure interact).

**B. Different culturalist approaches**

* Influence of the material framework ("flexible", "rigid", "very flexible" structuring of family education) on success or failure.
* into account the cultural level of the family:
* Explanation by cultural orientation (working-class families without ambition, turned towards the present / ambitious middle-class families, turned towards the future).
* Explanation by the cultural heritage bequeathed to children.

**Reviews**

In fact, the culturalist approach refuses to take into account the cultural distance to be travelled by the children of the working classes, a distance all the more important as the class in question is dominated and the school strives to impose the dominant culture.

All these studies consider that the working classes carry different values from those of the school (inability to adapt to school). These studies are based on a class ethnocentrism: the popular classes are described culturally in terms of lack, middle classes conveying "good culture".

Finally, by remaining very close to the discourse of the actors, culturalist researchers reproduce the dominant value judgments by giving them a sociological guarantee.

**2) The Conflictualist approach:**

The 70s saw the development of a critique of class ethnocentrism practiced by some scholars. This work shows that dominant cultural models are dominant only because they are those of the ruling classes, not because they are naturally superior. Thus, for authors such as Bourdieu and Passeron, or Althusser, the school has a function of ideological imposition and reproduction of the social relations of production.

**A. Objectives of the conflictualist current**

The conflictualist current "analyzes the ideological models, values and norms in force in schools [to] find that they refer to relations of class domination in which the school system is involved." The major macro sociological works carried out in this context show that the school favors the dominant classes to the detriment of the dominated classes.

**3) Towards a less mechanistic view of reproduction**

Some later works make it possible to moderate this type of overly mechanistic (deterministic) vision of the social relations at work in the school. It appears that the class struggle also runs through the school: teachers are not only agents at the service of the dominant classes, but also actors.

**The school divides**

According to Baudelot and Establet (the capitalist school in France), the school claims to want to ensure equal opportunities, but its real purpose is to reproduce the pre-existing social structure. The arbitrary nature of the sanctions at school favors this reproduction (selection favorable to pupils who are socially close to the teacher).

**4) The labelling effects**

The sociological research of the 70s provides empirical confirmation of the notion of the "Pygmalion effect", by highlighting the labeling effect: the expectations of the teacher (determined by his representation of the student) have an important effect on the success or failure of the student. The consequence of this research is that "only those who ignore these works can still speak of the social neutrality of the school and its teachers".

**Conclusion**

The educational sciences of the early 80s are concerned with the active role played by schools in the reproduction of social inequalities. Research makes it possible to question solutions proposed by common sense to guarantee equal opportunities. Political choices concerning schools must therefore be inspired by the results of sociology, which allows:

* evaluate the solutions implemented
* predict which solutions are inadequate

We will see that teachers often explain school failure following a culturalist approach, guilty for families, so as not to question their practices. Actors in the education system should adapt their behaviors to the results of sociology. For this, it would be necessary to ensure a better popularization of sociological work.