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Supporting a policy of success for disadvantaged schools:

Identification of contradictions around hierarchical power issues between activity systems

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French educational system as an instrument of hegemony

Schools have an important responsibility in reproducing social inequalities. More than 50 years ago, Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) highlighted the latent ideological functioning of the French educational system, which, in the name of its openly democratic recruitment, makes a social selection based on the cultural criteria of the dominant class. For them, this social selection is also made acceptable to the excluded and disadvantaged by a process of ideological production in which pupils from the working and middle classes find it necessary to legitimize their low social status through their failure at school. Half a century later, where do we stand? In 2012, the international evaluation PISA¹ point out that *‘the correlation between socio-economic background and performance’* is much more pronounced in France, *‘than in most other OECD countries’*. The French education system *‘is more unequal in 2012 than it was 9 years earlier and social inequalities worsened mainly between 2003 and 2006. In France, when you belong to a disadvantaged environment, you clearly have less chance of success today than in 2003’*. The school remains a powerful tool of hegemony in the sense that this concept was developed by Gramsci (1971). The concept of hegemony refers to *‘a particular way of conceptualizing power which amongst other things emphasizes how power depends upon achieving consent or at least acquiescence rather than just having the resources to use force, and the importance of ideology in sustaining relations of power’* (Fairclough, 2003: 45). The observation of serious inequalities in access to educational success for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds could lead to a pessimistic vision suggesting that any possibility of transformation of the system, not only to improve it (Engeström, 2017), is doomed to failure. However, for Sannino & Vainio (2015), who point out the importance of the concept of hegemony in a study on gender

¹ PISA is an internationally standardized evaluation of educational systems in the 30 OECD countries. The purpose of PISA is to assess the extent to which 15-year-olds completing compulsory schooling have the knowledge and skills required to play their full role in society (Figazzolo, 2009, p.3).

inequality in Finnish universities, *‘Dominance based on consensus is a contradictory phenomenon that is historically constructed and thus bound to transformations’* (p. 508). Accordingly, Kontinen, 2013, p. 118) argue that *‘the concept of hegemony is relevant to the contemporary developmental work research as well. First, it suggests paying attention not to economic relations but to political, institutional, ideological and cultural forms of power.’* More important for us, Sannino & Vaino (2015) offer a key to methodologically articulate the concept of hegemony to the theory of activity: *‘When historicized, local hegemonic struggles identified in discourse can direct the analysis towards the origins of clashes and problems occurring in everyday activities. This allows a deeper level of understanding of hegemonic relations by pointing at historical contradictions from which [inequalities of success in school] originates’* (p.508).

The purpose of this paper is to identify, through the problems encountered by school actors in shaping Priority Education (PE) reform, the contradictions but also the power, control and authority relationships they express. We will proceed as follows. First, we will present the priority education policy reform implemented following PISA 2012. In a second step, we will present the methods implemented as part of a research-intervention project to support the implementation of this reform. The results will focus on identifying contradictions at work through the identification of problems and conflicts that arise in daily practices. Finally, we will briefly discuss the results in terms of the relationship between power, hierarchy and authority.

The law on the rebuilding of the school and the reform of priority education

Following the results of PISA 2012, the French government undertook, in the space of three years, a series of reforms aimed at improving the ranking of schools in international rankings: curriculum reforms, priority education reforms, reform of school rhythms, etc. For the purpose of this paper, we will present briefly only two of them: the reform of primary and secondary education cycles and the reform of PE.

The reform of primary and secondary education cycles

National educational programs have traditionally been organized by year. In the law *‘on orientation and programming for the rebuilding of the school of the republic’* (July 2013), schooling is now organized in a 3-year cycle of education. The programs refer to these cycles and aim to allow greater flexibility in the work of curriculum development teams. The particularity of this reform is that Cycle 3 is shared between primary and secondary schools (see Figure 1). In this context, the monitoring and establishment of a dialogue between primary

schools and the secondary school seems important in the context of monitoring student performance.

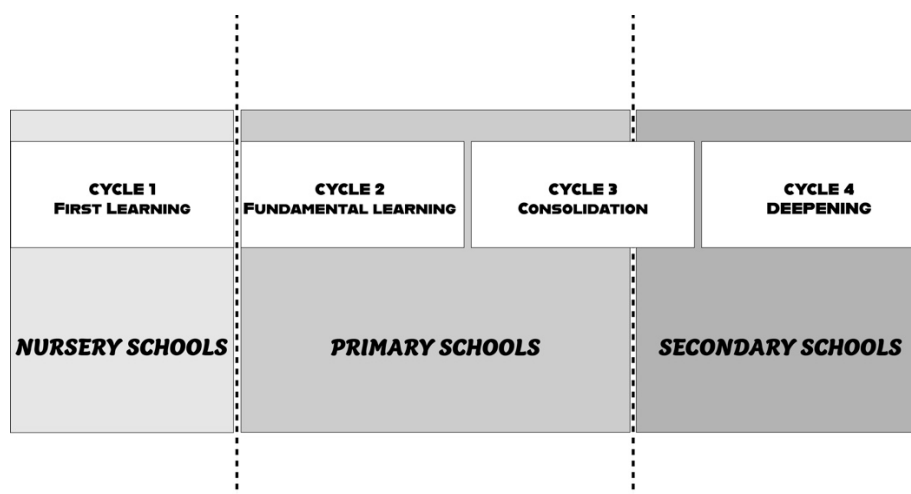


Figure 1: The organization of education cycles in French School since September 2016

The reform of 'Priority Education'

The second important reform concerns PE. The PE policy was initially set up following the accession to power of a socialist government in 1981. If it has known different periods (Rochex, 2018), several innovations are attributed to it (Frاندji & Rochex, 2011): (1) Working with local partners in a network (local administrations of urban policies, cultural institutions, social services, etc.); (2) Deconcentrating of regulation and policy instruments: the policy of devolution of powers and administration is supposed to allow adaptation to local specificities; (3) Positive discrimination: to give more to those who have less.

The 2015 reform aims to institutionalize the networking that emerged from the first PE policies. It is concretized by the setting up of Networks of Disadvantaged Schools (NDS). A NDS consists of a secondary school and several primary and nursery schools that are part of its recruiting sector (see Figure 2). The NDS is '*managed*' jointly by an inspector in charge of primary schools and the director of the secondary schools. The NDS's animation policy is carried out within a steering committee whose geometry is variable. The actors of this steering committee, in addition to the two institutional pilots, are the network coordinator, the network trainer, the nursery and sometimes, primary school directors.

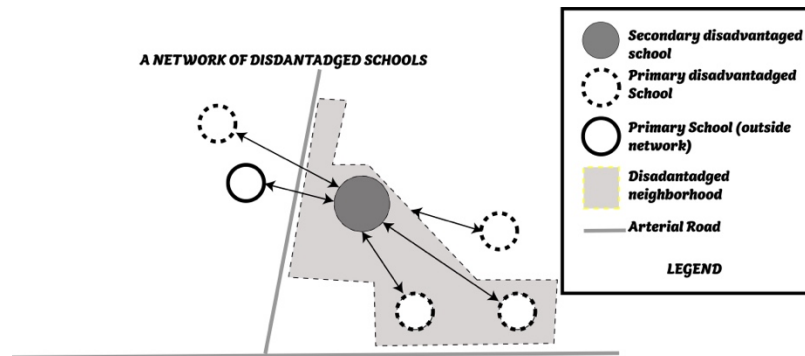


Figure 2: A network of disadvantaged schools

The design of these NDS aims to the ‘development of educational and teaching practices adapted to students’ needs’ and to enable evolution of educational organizations, specifically working better and more collectively as a team.

Methods

The request was initiated by the Créteil school region. The Créteil school region is the second-largest school region in France in terms of school population and is often cited for the social, economic and academic difficulties of its inhabitants. Seven NDS are involved in this project which concerns a population of about 10,000 pupils.

The initial request was for assistance in rebuilding a collective activity on each of the NDS. In this context, the methodology was based on developmental methods aimed at enabling each NDS to build their future collective work on the basis of the identification of contradictions. The protocol is strongly inspired by Change Laboratory (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013), although it combines ‘clinic of activity’ methods, e.g. individual self-confrontation (Clot & Kostulski, 2007) and inter-network groups that also allow for intra-trade collective work (for example, grouping of secondary school principals).

The data collection consists initially of an audio-video recording of steering committee meetings within each NDS. The participants are then self-confronted to this audio-video data. A third type of data concerns the recording of sequences of debate and discussions within the steering committee organized on the basis of tools produced by the participants, such as diagrams or a network map.

We mobilized a methodological framework to identify symptoms of contradictions in discursive data (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). We thus articulate self-confrontation interviews in order to understand the contradictions between activity systems behind the problems, conflicts, disturbances that occur during the steering committee.

Results

For the purpose of this paper, we choose to present only the analysis of a conflict case that emerges during an NDS steering committee. From this, we will present in a first part, the main contradiction that has become salient through the implementation of the PE reform. In a second step, we will interpret from this case the genesis of this conflict from the questions of power, authority and control.

Conflict during a steering committee

The conflict that emerges within the framework of the steering committee concerns the setting up by the network coordinator of a pedagogical action involving primary school teachers and secondary school mathematics teachers (see table 1). The director of the secondary school opposes the participation of secondary school teachers because, although informed, she must plan and organize the work of teachers. The inspector of the first level, who is the hierarchical superior of the coordinator, seeks to be the mediator of this conflict and points out several times that the rules are different between the first and second levels: if it is possible to deal directly with teachers in the first level, it is not possible to do so with the second level: it is necessary to discuss in advance with the management.

Table 1: The case of conflict during the steering committee.

Coordinator (1): We received an email from the mathematics teacher. So five teachers want to participate in the math challenge that concerns all schools of the town. And so the next steering committee will be on December 4, all day and so I will send at the same time as the teachers, to the teachers of your school (address to the director). (...) They seemed very interested, very involved, so they will be invited to this working time on December 4. So yes, they are invited. They are given time slots and they come whenever they want. Director: Oh yes...<u>but no!</u>. <u>You have to check with us before.</u> It's not that we're against this kind of meeting, but we need to know as soon as possible to know when they won't be there in the establishment. Inspector: I think the idea there was about their off-class hours. But, it is indeed necessary that the direction is in the loop so that <u>you can't it organize yourself.</u> Director: (...) <u>so that you understand, not every teacher is a free electron.</u> Coordo (1): so it is up to you to define their availability that day? Director: That's not what I'm saying either. You talked about the fact that you're going to offer them several slots.... Coordo (1): But it's all day long... Inspector: <u>But in fact you have to talk with the director before.</u> Director: Yes! Inspector: It is... it is absolutely essential that you (the director) be in the loop, that you be solicited for these questions. Because so that this does not disrupt the secondary school and at the same time it is a joint institutional work, you (the coordinator) really need to be aware of it. Coordo (1): But it seems to me that you were in the loop of the email that the math teacher coordinator sent. Director: (...) I was in that email, but then. Inspector: <u>In fact, you should not deal directly with the teacher. In the first degree at least, you can do it without going directly through the directors. But for the secondary school, you have to talk with the director before.</u> Coordo (1): But...
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Director: Listen, send the email and then let us handle it Coordo (1): Okay. Director: Because our goal will be to make this connection possible.

All the actors involved spoke about this episode in their self-confrontation interviews. The coordinator and the principal of the secondary school do not share the same object of work on the network. For the director, it is a question of working on '*the articulation between the levels of education*'. More specifically, it is a question of working on the articulation between primary and secondary schools, which explains why the agenda of the steering committee concerns almost exclusively cycle 3. For the coordinator, on the contrary, it is a question of '*working on new pedagogical modalities with primary and secondary school teachers who are not used to working together*'. While the coordinator is trying to create a different space for teachers to collaborate, the secondary school principal is trying to control the actions implemented on the network insofar as they must mainly concern cycle 3.

Authority, control of change and power to act

This conflict illustrates the resistance inherent in the interaction between different activity systems to the networking of disadvantaged institutions. The actors (the director of the secondary school and the inspector) who are institutionally the managers of the NDS seek to maintain the authority of which they are institutionally responsible. In doing so, the network coordinator finds it impossible to carry out her work: it is a question of organizing school work in new forms in a dedicated collaborative space where teachers work in horizontal collaboration. In this example, the director of the secondary school has a direct hierarchical authority over teachers, an authority he does not intend to grant: '*At our level, we are the ones who make the changes in secondary school. Mastery of change (...) and work materials are essential to be able to control this change. At the network level, we direct the change, that is to say the inspector and me, but after it is not we, who will implement the actions that we suggest.*' The question of control of change seems very important for the managers and they try to maintain their authority to enable this control in the network. This explains why the director exercises a form of authority over the coordinator, although she is not hierarchically in her vertical division of labour. The coordinator has to develop the collaborative work in the network without having authority on her work: '*We, coordinators, are the converging center of conflicting interests*'.

Figure 3 illustrates the configuration of authority relationships during this meeting. A relationship of authority is expressed by the principal on the coordinator so as to enforce the

hierarchy of the secondary school. But this relation of authority is expressed on an operator who is not in the same hierarchical line of the director.

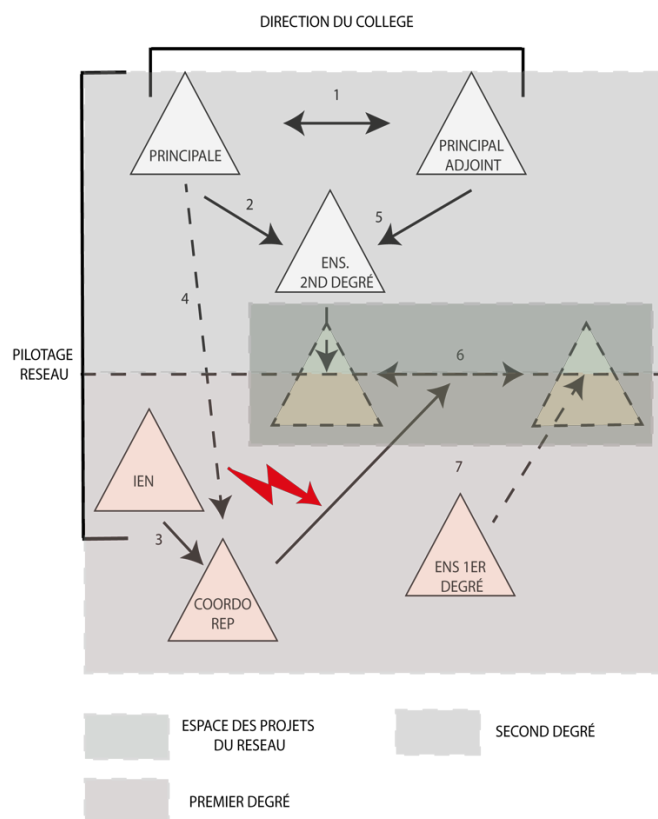


Figure 3: Relation of authority during the steering committee

In this diagram, it is possible to note that this relation of authority is in a relation of contradiction with the object that it makes of the network. For her, it is "to offer teachers of different levels of school different working modalities that engage them together." And projects, it's always a different modality. So suddenly, things have a meaning for students ". This authority relations diminish the power to act of the coordinator.

Object of work and vertical management of change

In an another steering comitte, the vice director of the secondary schools ask for the harmonization of the student skills assessment sheet which enables transmission of information between primary and secondary schools.

During interview he said that he needs to harmonize form between schools to be able to constitute homogeneous classes at the beginning of the year.

For the directors of primary schools this request is badly felt: « *as usual it is a demand from the secondary school* »; « *we have to do the job three times: first for the institution, second for the student's parents, third for the college* ». They explain that is it difficult for them to force their

colleagues to harmonize their assessment practices, because, in the French system, director of a primary school is a function and not a job: they don't have the authority to order their colleagues to change their assessment practices.

The inspector of primary schools understood that « *all teachers do not respect the institutional rules of evaluation: some continue to evaluate with grades whereas they should evaluate skills* ». Director of nursery schools are looking for people to join a conversation that is not directed at them: « *It's always like this: no demand comes to us. While we have competencies to participate to such task.*

The fact that the object for the direction of the secondary school is to work between the level of teaching implies that all the meeting is focus on the cycle 3 (see figure 1). This articulation is also problematic because of institutional differences between the first

One of the participants explain that: "*In terms of contradiction, they are trying to steer us towards a 6-year-old school of 16 years old with completely different status, the culture of the second degree will never be able to function like the first degree. We pilot with opposing energies that are institutional*". Moreover, because the director of the secondary school is the designed manager of the steering committee (with also the inspector of the primary schools), it involves that the director of the nursery schools tries to find their place in the meeting. However, the early enrolment of socially disadvantaged children appears to be an important lever in the fight against inequalities in school success.

From symptom to contradictions: implementing a network in a hierarchical system

Figure 3, based on the work of Spinuzzi (2015), represents the contradiction between the implementation of the reform embodied, on the one hand, by the activity of the coordinator (whose function was created in the reform) and the activity of the principals who seek to maintain control. The reform that promotes network collaboration comes up against a system that is hierarchically and vertically organized, on the one hand, by the student's path, and, on the other hand, by the way in which it is managed.

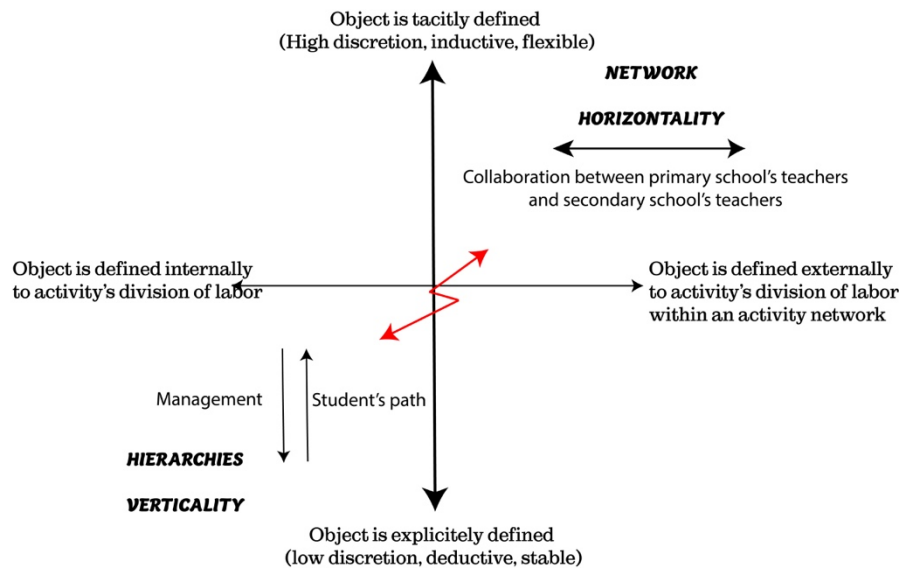


Figure 4: Contradiction related to the implementation of the reform based on Spinuzzi (2015)

Expansion of object without transformation of power relations?

In Activity-Theory, the identification of contradiction is of crucial importance: “If actors are able to identify and analyze the secondary contradictions of their activity system, they may focus their energy on the crucial task of resolving those contradictions by means of expanding the object and reorganizing the activity accordingly, instead of being victimized by changes that roll over them as it forces of a natural disaster (Engeström, 2018, po. 171).

The expansion of the object of activity need to be distinguish from quantitative increase of extension but is a qualitative and transformative reorganization of the object (Engeström, Puonti, Seppänen, 2003). Engeström (2000) identify tree dimensions of the expansion of the object: the social-spatial dimension (who else should be included); the anticipatory-temporal dimension (what previous and forthcoming steps should be considered) and the moral ideological dimension (who is responsible and who decides?).

In our study, we identify three potential dimensions of expansion of the object:

- (1) *The socio-temporal expansion of the object*: this means that the object become the manage the network in order to resolve the problems teachers faces. In that way, the coordinator become the more relevant person to manage the network because he/she is also involved in vocational training of teachers of the network.
- (2) *The temporal expansion of the object*: In that way, the object of the network is to build a coherent curriculum for student. The instrument the collective choosen to discuss and to build is four educational path which are a part of other reform of educational system: health education courses, citizenship educational pathway,

(3) *The ethical-political expansion of the object.* Network were chosen by the French ministry of National Education because of social difficulties. They are implanted on territory which are involved in the politics of town because the population cumulate social, economic and cultural difficulties. In that expansion of the object, the object of the network is to begin to be an actor of the territory in which it is implemented.

However, in the discussion, the collective always start to expand the temporal dimension of the activity. This temporal expansion let intact the division of work and the relations of power that matters in the intervention. This may be not the case in the future reforms of educational system which will involve more actors outside the school (see below).

Discussion and conclusion

Power and authority

The question of power and authority has been very rarely formalized in AT as in research on organizational learning (Blacker & McDonald, 2000, Engeström, 2009). In view of the possible link between the hegemonic tendency towards social reproduction and its inclusion in structures (such as the school institution) in which the actors act, the question of power and authority seems crucial to us in order to nourish the development of emancipatory activity within intervention. The role of activity theory in this context is indeed to collectively overcome the contradictions identified, or in the words of Sannino & Vaino (2015, p.519) '*to give rise to wider transformations in work and organizations*'. In other words, the question of Williams, Ferholt, Jornet, Nardi & Vadeboncoeur (2018, p. 190) seems to us at the heart of the development of a forth theory of activity theory: "*When we analyze an activity system, help resolve some of its contra- dictions, and claim to have made the system more efficient, have we changed, transformed, or transgressed the power relations and structural relations that matter? Has there been "development" from a critical, or any perspective?"*

The interest of this paper is to make a modest contribution to the development of a fourth generation of activity theory. Indeed, Engeström (2009) evokes the idea of a '*runaway object*' as a largely fragmented object, out of control and involving the linking of multiple interacting heterogeneous activity systems. We believe that the fight for equal student achievement is such a form of object in that it involves the collaboration of multiple activity systems: primary and secondary schools, of course, but also associations, local authorities, the regional political level, the Ministry of National Education, as well as researchers engaged in developmental work research. However, grasping these objects probably implies taking into account the power

relations that are expressed in local situations, to enable actors to overcome them by reinventing their practices and relationships.

Future development: expansion of the network in future political reforms

In the continuity of priority education networks, the current government intends to develop the idea of reorganizing the education system around the networking of heterogeneous actors. The Educational Cities aim to intensify the educational care of children from 3 years old and young people up to 25 years old, before, during, around and after the school setting. They consist of a broad alliance of educational actors working in the priority districts of urban policy: State services, local authorities, associations, residents. Through the Cities of Education, the Government wants to federate all the actors in school and extracurricular education in the territories that need it most and where public resources will be concentrated.

Starting from the work on network in priority education, the future challenge will be to involve more heterogenic actors concerned with education in a specific territory.



Figure 5: The educative city. Reform starting in September 2019

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