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Between Equity and Differentiation: An Analytical Schema of the Social Function of Education

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Between Equity and Differentiation: An Analytical Schema of the Social Function of Education

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Abstract

The educational sphere has an internal function relatively agreed by social scientists. Nonetheless, the contribution that educational systems provide to the society (i.e., their social function) does not have the same degree of consensus. Taking into consideration such theoretical precedent, the current article raises an analytical schema to grasp the social function of education considering a sociological perspective. Starting from the assumption that there is an intrinsic relationship between the internal and social functions of social systems, we suggest there are particular stratification determinants modifying the internal pedagogical function of education, which impact on its social function by creating simultaneous conditions of equity and differentiation. Throughout the paper this social function is considered a paradoxical mechanism. We highlight how this paradoxical dynamic is deployed in different structural levels of the educational sphere. Additionally, we discuss eventual consequences of this paradoxical social function for the inclusion possibilities that educational systems offer to individuals

Keywords: educational system, internal function, social function, paradox, inclusion/exclusion

Entre Equidad y Diferenciación: Un Esquema Analítico de la Función Social de la Educación

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Resumen

El ámbito educativo tiene una función relativamente aceptada por los científicos sociales. Sin embargo, la contribución que los sistemas educativos ofrecen a la sociedad (es decir, su función social) no tiene el mismo grado de consenso. Teniendo en cuenta tal precedente teórico, el presente artículo plantea un esquema analítico para entender la función social de la educación, teniendo en cuenta una perspectiva sociológica. A partir de la suposición de que existe una relación intrínseca entre la función interna y social de los sistemas sociales, sugerimos que hay determinantes de estratificación modificando la función pedagógica interna, que repercuten en su función social, creando simultáneamente condiciones de equidad y diferenciación. En todo el documento esta función social se considera un mecanismo paradójico. Destacamos cómo esta dinámica paradójica se implementa en diferentes niveles estructurales de la esfera educativa. Además, discutimos las consecuencias eventuales de esta función social paradójica para las posibilidades de inclusión que ofrecen los sistemas educativos a los individuos

Palabras clave: sistema educativo, función interna, función social, paradoja, inclusión/exclusión

Current social institutions and systems have singular internal modes of operation that determine their particularities and also reflect the differences among diverse social spheres (Luhmann, 1977). For instance, religious institutions operate differently from scientific organizations, and the operations of political entities are possible to differentiate from educational, legal, and artistic dynamics. Moreover, these internal functions are associated with specific contributions to the society that are equally distinguishable: while the political system contributes to the regulation of collectively binding decisions within society, science is related to advancement of knowledge, and legal institutions to the generation of juridical frameworks promoting normative stability. The contributions that each social institution renders to the society have been called social functions (Archer, 1979; Luhmann, 1977).

In the case of the educational sphere, the attempts to specifically classify and conceptualize its social function have been a task performed regularly not only by social scientists but also by every person who participates, or previously has participated, in educational institutions. By using the example of large student mobilizations in different countries during 2011 and 2012, this fact emerges clearly: thanks to the mass media, it was unusual to find an individual without an opinion on the social inputs that this social space should have, as well as the shortcomings and consequences of its current configuration.

Nonetheless, the generalized discussion about the social function of education shows an enormous variety of opposing or antagonistic approaches. For example, considering the development of the sociological discipline, while some sociologists have indicated that the social function of education consists in the generation of social equity which can be represented by individuals' equal opportunities to access diverse educational organizations in order to receive academic training (Durkheim, 1922; Coleman, 1966; Parsons, 1972) on the other hand, certain authors have specified that education's social function refers mainly to the social differentiation of educational opportunities according to diverse stratification features of each student (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964; Althusser, 1970; Boudon, 1974).

Likewise, such opposite sociological approaches find a high correspondence with individual beliefs about the current capability of

education to promote equitable or differentiated educational opportunities. Regarding the social inequality module of the International Social Survey Program of 2009 (described in annex section), we find at least two main opinions about the social function of educative spheres: one that emphasizes the equitable generation of educational opportunities, and another that remarks the segregationist character of educational institutions among individuals with diverse social backgrounds.

In order to better understand individual opinions about the variety of educational social functions, we highlight some particular trends. As can be appreciated in figure 1, nearly 35% of people agree and strongly agree that only students coming from better secondary schools are able to access university education, while 48% of people disagree and strongly disagree with this claim. In the same sense, figure 2 shows that 38% of people agree and strongly agree with the opinion that only rich people can attend universities, while 48% disagreed and strongly disagreed.

Only students from the best secondary schools have a good chance to obtain a university education

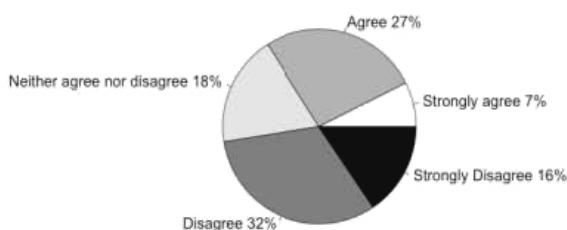


Figure 1. First Question about Equity or Differentiation of Educational System (N=46.060)

Source: Own calculation according to ISSP, 2009.

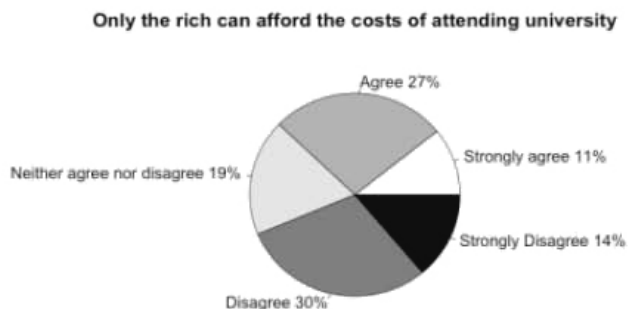


Figure 2. Second Question about Equity or Differentiation of Educational System (N=46.060).

Source: Own calculation according to ISSP, 2009.

Nonetheless, when people were consulted whether the same opportunity to access a university education exists regardless of social attributes, 60% agreed and strongly agreed (see figure 3).

People have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background

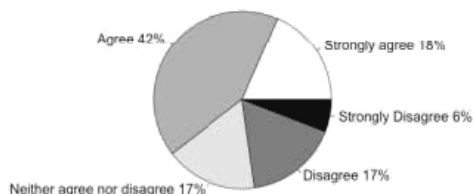


Figure 3. Third Question about Equity or Differentiation of Educational System (N=46.060).

Source: Own calculation according to ISSP, 2009.

Throughout this article, we argue that such diversification of both public opinions and sociological proposals about the actual contributions of education to society warrant an analytical effort to

precisely determine whether there is a purely social function of educational systems. Moving forward on that, the current paper aims to develop an analytical schema that will allow us to understand what education's contribution to society is, through a dialogue with different sociological approaches. Our main hypothesis is that it is not possible to provide a single definition of the educational function of education, because there are some internal dynamics in the social sphere producing a contradictory social function.

However, in order to understand such hypothesis, in the first section we begin making the distinction between the internal function and the social function of education. As we explain below, the internal function of the educational sphere corresponds to the pedagogical selection that is, an academic mechanism that organizes educational trajectories mainly by means of pedagogical criteria. We show how this internal function is displayed in different structural levels of the educational sphere (individual, organizational, and systemic level). Then, taking into consideration several studies on how stratification factors (socioeconomic status, gender, and cultural capital) affect people's educational trajectories, we argue that the internal educational function is based not only on pedagogical criteria but also on non-pedagogical criteria (stratification criteria).

Then, we explain that this internal educational phenomenon (i.e., pedagogical and non-pedagogical selections) is connected with the configuration of its social function: The educational sphere promotes contexts characterized by social equity and social differentiation conditions. More specifically, we suggest that non-pedagogical selections are connected with the generation of social contexts branded by social differentiation dynamics. Therefore, the current article aims to indicate that social equity (the primary social aim of education) and social differentiation represent simultaneously the contribution of education to society. This simultaneous social functionality will be understood within this paper as a contradiction or a paradox.

Finally, in order to completely comprehend this analytical schema, we illustrate first the manner in which this paradoxical social function is displayed within the structural levels of educational systems, and second, some possible consequences of such social functioning on the inclusion avenues that educative sphere offer to students.

Hence, the article is divided into five sections: First, we define the internal function of education as pedagogical selection. Second, we describe particular theoretical approaches that have defined the social function of education considering the generation of social equity, and those that have indicated, conversely, that it corresponds to the generation of social differentiation. Third, the hypothesis that supports the current article is explained. Fourth, we identify some probable consequences of this paradoxical social functioning between the generation of social equity and differentiation, in terms of the process of individual inclusion within the educative sphere. Finally, taking into account all the previous sections, we conclude, providing a theoretical discussion about the actual social configuration of educational systems.

Internal Function of Education: Pedagogical Selection

To identify the social function of the educational sphere (i.e., its contribution to society), we must understand aspects of the internal function of this field (Luhmann, 1977). Few efforts have been made by sociologists to specifically define the intrinsic operation of education. Most of them have implicitly showed that the main educative operation refers to academic evaluations and tests (Berstein, 1995) or to educational selection (Dubet, 2004). However, sociologists Niklas Luhmann and Karl Schorr dedicated many efforts toward proposing that what intrinsically characterizes an educational system is pedagogical selection (Luhmann & Schorr, 2000).

They proposed that pedagogical selection aims primarily at the configuration of internal consistency among different academic stages within an educative sphere. Specifically, pedagogical selection is defined as a mechanism intended to educate and evaluate diverse groups of individuals through educational institutions such as schools, lyceums, or universities, allowing the achievement of an educational trajectory (Luhmann, 1996). The internal function pedagogical selection does not refer to the notion of selectivity as normally is understood (i.e., as a limitation of individual opportunities on this or other social contexts). It is rather understood as a selection mechanism associated exclusively with the coordination of educational training and evaluations (Luhmann & Schorr, 2000).

The fundamental way in which pedagogical selection operates in different educational phases depends on the permanent and systematic distinction between good and bad, or better and worse students (Luhmann, 1996). This distinction sets the evaluative pattern of educational performance and does not describe, as might be presumed, a moral or ethical principle of each student. The distinction better/worse executed by pedagogical selection is probably fully understandable if we observe its deployment within different structural levels of education: individual, institutional, and systemic

Individual Level (Classrooms): According to Luhmann and Schorr (2000), in this first level the pedagogical selection mechanism occurs in every interaction between teachers and students, where the educator establishes educational assessments and measures of surveillance in order to determine what constitutes *good* and *bad* student performance.

Institutional Level (Educational Organizations): Pedagogical selection in educative institutions is expressed whenever a student has the possibility of accessing some school or university and he or she is assigned to some grade or classroom. When that occurs, pedagogical selection has classified as *good* every student registered in any institution, but there remains the option that a *good* student would be expelled, suspended, or required to repeat a grade. In any of these cases, pedagogical selection will designate students as *bad* or *worse* (Luhmann & Schorr, 2000).

Systemic Level (Educational Sphere): On this last level, pedagogical selection operates when it is socially established that the education and not other domains of modern society corresponds to the social system that guarantees the distribution of knowledge. In this case, pedagogical selection classifies as *better* the students that are integrated into the educational sphere and receive academic knowledge, and *worse* the students that utilize other ways for accomplishing such objective (Luhmann & Schorr, 2000).

It is important to note that, since different theoretical traditions within the sociological discipline exist, there is no real consensus about pedagogical selection as the main internal function of education. However, we recognize that this analytical notion constitutes one of the most accurate sociological definitions about it. Indeed, this conception presents arguments very close to the definitions proposed by other

sociologists about evaluation or selection as the intrinsic mechanism of education.

Social Function of Education: Social Equity or Social Differentiation?

Considering the internal function of the educational sphere, one might find a kind of agreement with pedagogical selection defined as a mechanism intended to support the academic training and evaluation of each individual, not only at the classroom level but also at the institutional and systemic level. Nevertheless, in the case of the conceptualization of its social function, there does not seem to be any kind of consensus. Based on diverse epistemological and normative approaches, some authors have suggested, on the one hand, that educational systems contribute to the generation of social equity, while others have indicated, on the other hand, that education institutions produce mainly social differentiation.

Social Equity

Different sociological studies have characterized educative institutions by their role in the generation of equitable opportunities or social equity. Émile Durkheim (1893) was the first to sociologically define education from this perspective. Influenced by the social philosophers Pierre Leroux and August Comte, he stated that education was an instrumental institution for both moral socialization and cultural cohesion within modern industrial societies. From this functionalistic approach, education was also characterized as the generation of learning opportunities for everyone who requires some employment status (Durkheim, 1922).

Afterward, it was Talcott Parsons who indicated that education is established as one of the most relevant social sub-systems of the “societal community” responsible for providing functional solutions for allowing the social inclusion of individuals (1953, 1972). Concerning that, in a similar manner to Durkheim, Parsons (1953) also pointed out that education like the family and the legal entities emerges as an institutional transmitter of cultural patterns that contribute to the

formation of individuals eligible for the economic-labor sphere. As other social scientists, Parsons remarked that the social function of education is to provide equal access to learning opportunities, by promoting more and better meritocratic mechanisms on educational trajectories (Benadusi, 2001; Coleman, 1966; Parsons, 1972; Saunders, 1995). Consequently, we suggest that the promotion of social equity (impartiality toward inclusion in the school formation and training benefit) has become a sociological definition of the social function of education.

Social Differentiation

Other sociological studies have demonstrated consistent and significant associations between academic achievement and certain social stratification categories, such as gender, cultural capital, and socioeconomic status; thus, one of the main objectives of modern education, social equity, seems not to have been accomplished. In this sense, the mediation of cultural patterns over the learning abilities of students seems to be indicating the existence of an educational contribution to the society different from the one indicated previously.

Some theoretical research within the discipline of the sociology of education, mainly branded by Marxist and Structuralist approaches, has emphasized the generation of social differentiation through educational systems as education's main social function. Accordingly, in contrast to studies about social equity, the social function of education has been characterized as an ideological device of the State intended to ensure the reproduction of capitalist relations of production (Althusser, 1970), to assure the legitimacy of the unequal economic and political social order (Gramsci, 1971), and to generalize cultural patterns of the bourgeoisie (Apple, 1986).

Moreover, based on structuralist sociology specifically, the French reproductivist perspective (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964) the educational context has been treated as a social stage to benefit students who are better gifted with cultural and economic capital and to relegate students without these social privileges to weak educational statuses. Some of the common results indicate that educational careers are strongly segmented, normally through the socioeconomic status (SES) of each

student (Mittal & Bhattacharya, 2013). Nevertheless, the SES or the economic capital is only one of several social factors influencing the educational trajectories of people. Cultural capital, understood as a set of cultural practices, resources, and competences internalized by each individual, is a variable that has a significant effect on the differentiation of any social space (Bourdieu, 1997). In the case of the educational field, it has been proposed that cultural skills, language styles, behavioral codes, and cognitive resources socially acquired contribute to the production of better academic performance (Boudon, 1974).

Additionally, according to different international measures, it has been demonstrated that gender is another stratification factor determining educational attainments and academic trajectories (OECD, 2010). Gender has been defined as a set of socially constructed male and female characteristics that determine opportunities and access to diverse educational choices and benefits (Butler, 2004).

By considering all the previous investigation, it can be stated that the social function of education might also be related to the sociological notion of social differentiation, which can be summarized as the educational capability to reproduce undeserved and inequitable differences among individuals with diverse social attributes vis-à-vis learning skills and academic levels.

The Paradoxical Social Function of Education

Taking into consideration the definition of the educational internal operation and both approaches to its social function, the objective of this section is to develop an analytical schema of the social function of education.

We suggest firstly that stratification factors associated with each individual produce some alterations in the internal function of the educative sphere (i.e., pedagogical selection and its classification between better/worse students). Specifically, we propose that individual stratification features such as gender, economic status, and cultural capital produce pedagogical selections not based on pedagogical criteria, but precisely on such stratification or “non-pedagogical” criteria. Henceforth, the influence of stratification factors on the internal

educational mechanism will be called non-pedagogical selection, as distinct from pedagogical selection, which operates only upon pedagogical criteria.

We denominate such educational selection as non-pedagogical also because it is based on determinants external to the intrinsic educational mechanisms. Put in terms previously discussed, non-pedagogical selection emerges whenever the internal function of education classifies good and bad students not only according to their academic training and knowledge, but also with respect to different individual characteristics not corresponding to the educational field for instance, cultural and economic features.

The strong relationship between the internal and the social function of any social system (Luhmann, 1977) also comes into play in our schema. We argue that the duality of pedagogical and non-pedagogical selection affects the generation of social contexts characterized simultaneously by conditions of equity and differentiation. More specifically, we suggest that non-pedagogical selection has consequences for the educational social function by producing social contexts branded by social differentiation dynamics. Thus, social educational systems not only would produce social contexts of equity (primary aim), but also simultaneously (and contradictorily) social differentiation scenarios. We suggest thus that both educational contexts represent paradoxically the contribution of education to society, or the educational social function. We summarized the formulated analytical schema in the following figure.

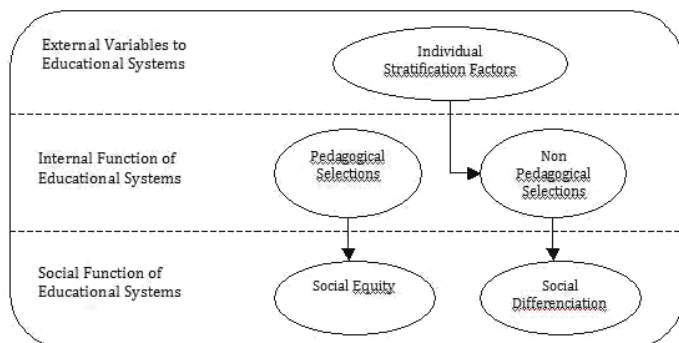


Figure 4. Analytical Schema of Paradoxical Social Function of Education

In order to fully understand our schema, in the following paragraphs, we show how social equity and social differentiation are displayed within the three structural levels of educational spheres. For these explanations, we take into consideration several sociological research examples.

Individual Level: On this first level, which has to do with the relationships among teachers and students within classrooms, the social equity function of education is observable whenever teachers exchange knowledge with students attending educational institutions. On the other hand, it might be argued that social differentiation appears in at least in two situations. First, when we can appreciate consistent differences in academic results and cultural dispositions attributable to the social backgrounds of students (Breen & Goldthorpe, 2002). Second, when educators generate differentiated beliefs or expectations of their students according to their different social attributes. Research has shown that when teachers have higher expectations of their students, the students' attitudes toward learning and their academic performance improve (Tiedemann, 2000). Specifically, it has been noted that teachers' expectations of their students vary by gender and sociocultural level, and that these same social attributes are associated with the educative attainment gap (Dee, 2005; Kessler et al., 1985).

Institutional level: At the institutional or organizational level, the social equity function is expressed by the generalized and unrestricted possibility of accessing the primary, secondary, and university public institutions intended to offer an educational career. Nonetheless, the institutional level generates social differentiation as well, defining who are eligible and who do not have access to some specific educative organizations, such as religious or private educational institutions (Madero & Madero, 2012).

Additional evidence of social differentiation on this level refers to the manner in which the student composition of different grades and classrooms, determined by non-pedagogical criteria such as gender or cultural skills (which are always defined by institutions), influences the apparently individual academic choices (humanistic, scientific, artistic, or technical vocational programs). The effects of the classroom's composition can influence not only the students' personal elections but also their individual academic achievements and even the growth or

decline of their career expectations (Forgasz, 2006). The influence of educational compositional variables on individual performance has been understood as the peer effect (Coleman, 1966).

Systemic level: At the systemic level of the educational sphere, the social equity function is symbolized by the ability of education to academic knowledge for every individual of a society, not restricting this right only to people from families with a high social status, as occurred in pre-modern societies (Durkeim, 1893). Moreover, at the systemic level, social differentiation is expressed when it is considered legitimate and tolerable that students' educational trajectories are determined by social stratification factors that is, when it is considered normal that pedagogical selection is based upon non-pedagogical criteria.

Consequences of the Paradoxical Social Function of Education on the Process of Educational Inclusion

Having developed an analytical schema for the paradoxical social function of the educational system within its different levels, we can move to an examination of some socio-educational consequences involved in this process. Specifically, questions arise about the manner in which this contradictory social function influences the inclusion of people by the educational system.

Following Marxist or stratification traditions in education research, our interest might be on highlighting the inability of the educative sphere to generate universal opportunities of access. However, starting from the suggested analytical schema, that would seem sociologically inappropriate, because even though the high increase of the student population rate during the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries is not enough to cover the total amount of people with prospects to be educated (OECD, 2010; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993), modern educational systems do not present any formal restriction to the educative inclusion of any social group. That occurred clearly in pre-modern societies (Durkheim, 1893). Nevertheless, individuals are currently witnesses of social differentiation within different structural levels of the educational sphere, which lead us to discuss as problematic the inclusion and exclusion processes not only for those who are outside the educational

institutions but also for the students inside them.

Social inclusion may be understood as the equal possibility for each individual to participate within different domains of society (Bohn, 2009; Madero & Castillo, 2012; Mascareño, 2012; Stichweh, 2002). In the case of the educational system, included persons might correspond to those evaluated by its internal function (pedagogical selection) at the individual, institutional, or systemic levels of education, while excluded persons might be individuals who do not participate in this kind of process, such as people who do not attend a school or university (Ossandón, 2006).

Nonetheless, from our perspective, this way of understanding the educational inclusion/exclusion remains limited. Instead, we remark that social differentiation (which emerges as a consequence of the influence of non-pedagogical criteria on the internal functioning of education) is an obstacle to full inclusion of students with unfavorable social features. Put in other terms, students who frequently experience social differentiation due to their individual stratification features might be considered people with problems in achieving normal inclusion or persons who are only partially included in the educational field (Madero, 2011; Madero & Mora, 2011; Mascareño, 2012). The distinction depends on whether individuals are included under appropriate and satisfactory social conditions (i.e., normally included), or under feeble and frail social conditions (i.e., partially included).

In the case of educational careers, for example, we suggest that those students who have gained social mobility through education (Breen et al., 2002) that is, people who have access to an educational organization and, as a result, also possess improved social status correspond to persons normally included in the educational sphere. On the other hand, individuals with low social and cultural statuses who experience educational inclusion primarily by finding an educational position, but who maintain a sort of weak academic status for instance, those who perform poorly or whose access is restricted to specific educational institutions would correspond to individuals partially included in the educational sphere.

According to this example, we propose that partial inclusion might also be understood as being between inclusion and exclusion in any social domain. Additionally, to finalize the argument, it is important to

highlight that these kinds of distinctions probably are more visible according to the extent of the stratification in each educational system (Allmendinger, 1989; van de Werfhorst, 2004). This means that a more standardized (or less stratified) educational system might show fewer examples of partial inclusion, while educative spheres that are highly stratified typically have many students who are included only “partially”.

Conclusion

The different social institutions and systems of current society have singular internal modes of operation that determine their particularities and also reflect the differences among diverse social spheres (Luhmann, 1977). Additionally, these internal functions are intrinsically associated with specific contributions to the society that are equally distinguishable. The contributions that each social context renders to the society have been called social functions (Archer, 1979; Luhmann, 1977). In the case of the educational system, it has been shown that there is a sort of consensus about its internal mode of operation (pedagogical selection); nonetheless, the attempt to classify its social function has been an exercise without any kind of agreement. As we show in the next paragraph, this fact is clearly illustrated in sociological research.

On the one hand, some authors have indicated that the social function of education consists in the generation of social equity, referring to the unrestricted possibilities to access to diverse educational organizations for the purpose of receiving academic training, while other authors have specified that the social function of education refers to the social differentiation of educational opportunities according to the social and cultural background of each student. As we showed at the beginning of this article, a study of the International Social Survey Program (2009), demonstrate that both sociological approaches find a high correspondence on the diversification of individual opinions about the capability of education to promote either equitable or differentiated opportunities.

Bearing in mind such precedents, current paper constructed an analytical schema to overcome the absence of a consensus on the

definition of education's social function. Starting from the assumption about an intrinsic relationship between the internal and social functions of social systems (Luhmann, 1977), we suggested first there are particular stratification determinants modifying the internal pedagogical function of the education (i.e., pedagogical selection and its classification between better/worse students). Specifically, we indicated that individual stratification features such as gender, economic status, and cultural capital generate pedagogical selections not based on pedagogical criteria, but precisely on such stratification or "non-pedagogical" criteria.

Second, we argued that this internal educational phenomenon affects the generation of social contexts, characterized simultaneously by social equity and social differentiation conditions, which is possible to appreciate within different structural levels of this social space (at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels). Thus, we remarked that not only one of them but rather both educational contexts represent paradoxically the contribution of education to society, or the social function of education.

This paradox necessitated the development of an analytical exercise that dialogued with different sociological approaches from the theories of classical sociologists to the social system theory. Only through the coupling of these approaches was it possible to observe a social function differentiated by the form of the two indicated sides. This complementation allowed additional understanding of the specific stratification factors (gender, cultural capital, or social status) that create the scenario for non-pedagogical selections, promoting as a consequence the creation of a paradoxical social function in this social field.

With the proposed analytical schema about the social function of education, and especially with the elucidation of social differentiation as one of its possible expressions, we reflected on the cultural conditions that confront educational fields stabilized upon the internal function of pedagogical selection. Put in the terms discussed above, this article warned that stratification conditions can determine the configuration of different structural levels of educational systems.

The permanency of social differentiation as one educational social function alerted us also that education has insufficient mechanisms to

promote the generation of normal inclusion for everyone (Madero & Madero, 2012; Mascareño, 2012). Instead, individuals with low social and cultural status normally experience partial educational inclusion or restricted access to specific educational institutions. This lack of opportunities shows the limited ability of this social field to create social equity conditions for each individual with expectations of participating in the educational system.

This arises not as a typical Marxist or Reproductivist criticism about the permanency of social differentiation conditions generating segregated educational trajectories, but rather as a general reminder about the educational system as an institution that has failed to develop inclusion mechanisms based strictly upon pedagogical criteria. Thus, our theoretical study reveals the ongoing need for social equity, especially for students evaluated normally by non-pedagogical criteria in different structural levels of education.

An analytical schema that understand the educational system as a field that simultaneously produces social equity and social differentiation also give us some preliminary tasks for further studies. Specifically, it seems to be lacking more investigation on the manner in which some non-pedagogical selections still influence educational careers, e.g. research that increase the comprehension over the effect of the differentiated expectations of teachers on the academic achievements of their students, or more studies about the impact of the compositional or peer effects by social status or gender on individual educational trajectories. Such information will be useful for policies that allow moving toward the construction of an educational system operating mainly upon pedagogical criteria.

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Annex

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) corresponds to a cross-national collaboration project of public opinion surveys concerning several social topics. It started in 1983 considering four countries: Germany, United States, Great Britain and Australia. Currently it includes more than 46,000 people from 48 countries. Each year the programme addresses a particular module, which is repeated in following waves of the ISSP allowing cross-sectional comparisons. Data is archived by GESIS institute (<http://www.gesis.com>) in Germany. In the year 2009 social inequality module was the main research topic. Concerned countries were: Australia (n=1525), Argentina (n=1133), Austria (n=1019), Belgium (n=1115), Bulgaria (n=1000), Canada (n=421), Chile (n=1000), China (n=3010), Croatia (n=1201), Cyprus (n=1000), Czech Republic (n=1205), Denmark (n=1518), Estonia (n=1005), Finland (n=880), France (n=2817), Germany (n=1395), Great Britain (n=958), Hungary (n=1010), Iceland (n=947), Israel (n=1193), Italy (n=1084), Japan (n=1296), Latvia (n=1069), New Zealand (n=935), Norway (n=1456), Philippines (n=1200), Poland (n=1263), Portugal (n=1000), Russia (n=1603), Slovakia (n=1159), Slovenia (n=1065), South Africa (n=3305), South Korea (n=1599), Spain (n=1215), Sweden (n=1137), Switzerland (n=1229), Taiwan (n=2026), Turkey (n=1569), Ukraine (n=2012), United States (n=1581) and Venezuela (n=999).