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## Social Production of Educational Inequalities Studied through the Schooling Trajectories of Swiss Apprentices\*

George Waardenburg\*\*

Future historians of [our] society will certainly retain as one of the main characteristics of the finishing 20th and beginning 21st century the slowing down, interruption, even reversal of the preceding decades' diminishing of inequalities between social groups.

Alain Bihr & Roland Pfefferkorn, *Le système des inégalités*, p.3<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Introduction

Social inequalities appear to be on the rise in many different countries but also on a global scale. This phenomenon is nowadays recognised by dominant financial and political actors and is widely discussed among them because of its potential disrupting impact on the moral and political credibility of governments, economic experts and multinational corporations (Rimbert, 2008). This is a major characteristic of “globalization” in contemporary societies and economies.

The main empirical indicators used to observe these social inequalities are based on “economic capital”, i. e. unequal access to money as either income or wealth. This is an ever more significant indicator, because of the growing importance of money relationships in everyday life for the whole of the population of our globalized world. However, social inequalities cannot be understood when one only studies the unequal distribution and accumulation of “economic capital”. As Pierre Bourdieu developed in his major study, *La Distinction*, it is the distribution through society (“social space”) of social agents (i. e. “individuals”) according to their combined possession of economic *and cultural* capital that structures relationships and inequalities between them. Cultural capital can be defined here as being substantially (but unequally) transmitted by the school system, “the only [institution] entitled to transmit this hierarchised body of knowledge and know-how which constitutes legitimate culture” (Bourdieu, 1979, 378). It is important to underscore that the

\* This article is the fruit of an ongoing PhD research conducted at the University of Geneva (Department of Sociology), under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Franz Schultheis

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1 The author has translated this quotation, as well as all others in this paper.

acquisition of cultural capital (especially in the institutionalised form of diplomas and degrees) helps towards acquiring economic capital (income through higher wages), and that economic capital helps one's children to acquire cultural capital (thanks to private lessons, enough space at home to study, etc.). The opposite is also true. These capitals therefore are closely correlated, which makes social inequalities so much more durable.

Now, it is of course well known, at least since Bourdieu and Passeron's study *Les Héritiers* published in 1964, that school systems transmit this cultural capital quite unequally according to the pupils' social background, which is closely marked by their parents' possession of economic and social capital. This principle of reproduction has been largely confirmed ever since, although many teachers and sometimes governments have tried to correct this social dynamic which completely contradicts the principle of a meritocratic schooling system supposed to enable every child to learn strictly according to his or hers "abilities"<sup>2</sup>. The PISA study has once again shown the major impact of social background on pupils' school performance (OECD, 2005). This dynamic of ongoing reproduction of social inequalities by the school system also plays an important role in VET-based systems (Vocational Education and Training). In this paper we discuss how the opportunity to quit a full-time school career in order to engage in a company-based apprenticeship is affected by this dynamic of social reproduction, which we will also reappraise in the course of our discussion.

## 2 Some theoretical considerations on school

The inequalities produced by modern educational systems, including VET-based ones such as Switzerland's, do not appear as such to many of those who work daily in the educational system. Those who are least aware of this complex production and reproduction of social inequalities are maybe the pupils themselves. But as we shall see, they themselves play an active role in the process by trying to cope with the constraints put on them and figuring out which role they can play in carving out their own personal future. The possibilities and abilities they acquire, essentially school capital as a specific form of cultural capital, depend on how well they manage on these two levels. Their mastery of schoolwork depends largely on the social resources to which they have access: cultural and economic capital but also social capital and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1998) to acquire school dispositions through relationships with others, especially teachers.<sup>3</sup>

2 A concept that is also quite problematic from a sociological point of view, as Marcelle Stroobants (1993, 337) reminds us of "the efficiency of judgment in the recognition of knowledge and know-how".

3 Thus, children and youngsters can acquire substantial cultural capital even if their family background is poorly endowed with it. Conversely, they can be hindered from acquiring their family's

Here we will try to understand a striking observation we have made during our ongoing PhD research on the professional and educational careers of apprentices in French-speaking Switzerland. Almost all of them opted for an apprenticeship as if no other (i. e. school based) option was conceivable for them. Through careful analysis of the interviews made with them it appears in fact that their daily experience at school had non-consciously<sup>4</sup> convinced them that they had to stop school and start an apprenticeship. In fact it appeared to most of them that the specific sort of apprenticeship didn't matter so much, as long as it seemed interesting enough to them (their definition of what interested them could however be more or less broad: "not working outdoors", "doing some sort of designing with computers", "working on a machine", ...). This appreciation is the fruit of their experience of school over the years. To analyze it we need to define school sociologically.

Schools employ several "control techniques" on their pupils so as to "gain a hold on their behaviour". They have a specific form of discipline to do so. As such, they encourage the development of a specific type of subject (Foucault, 2001, 1481). Schools can also be characterised as "heterotopias", a concept developed by Michel Foucault meaning a "sort of realised type of utopia in which all the other existing sites of the general culture are at the same time represented, contested and inverted" (Foucault, 2001, 1574). More precisely, they can be considered a "deviant heterotopia: in which one places those individuals whose behaviour deviates from the (...) common norm". The norm here is that in modern industrial (capitalist) societies able-bodied people are supposed to work for a living. Thereby they earn money and can gain access as formally independent individuals to socially desirable goods and relationships.

One can characterize this specific form of discipline ("school form") somewhat separated from the rest of society as follows (Vincent et al, 1994, 39): "the constitution of childhood as a separate universe, the importance of learning abstract rules, the rational organization of time, the development and repetition of exercises which have no other function than learning and learning according to the rules, in other words whose purpose is circumscribed to itself". The values of the school form are based on "the primacy of discursive reasoning, abstraction and theory" (Grignon, 1972, 26). It is to this sociological concept of "school form" that we will be referring to throughout our article.

We can observe that the fully successful Swiss school career aims at a high degree of internalization of the school form's values through the mastery of several

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cultural capital depending on the concrete modalities of inter-personal relationships. See also Darmon (2007, 50–51).

4 The "non-consciousness" of social phenomena as such is the *raison d'être* of sociology: "what we could call the principle of non-consciousness, conceived as a condition *sine qua non* of the constitution of sociological science is nothing else than the reformulation, according to the logic of this science, of the principle of methodological determinism which no science could renounce without repudiating itself as such." (Bourdieu et al, 2005, 30–31)

major subjects: especially three languages and mathematics. Obtaining the highest Swiss school diploma, the Federal Matura, acknowledges this socially. The specific elements of cultural capital taught at school can be learned all the more quickly as the social (family) environment of the pupil has already transmitted cultural capital and especially the right dispositions for acquiring school capital.

But school does not only transmit cultural capital. It also helps to model the perceptions pupils develop about their own abilities and aspirations for the future. "One of the fundamental effects of school is the manipulation of aspirations. One always forgets that school is not only a place where one learns things, knowledge, techniques, etc. It is also an institution that [selectively] delivers titles and therefore rights. And at the same time it confers aspirations." (Bourdieu, 1984, 147)

School can thus be conceptualized as a deviant heterotopia mandatory for all youth of a certain age group (6–15 years on average in Switzerland). It is built on a specific set of working principles which are not only distinct from the alternative social environments in which children and youth participate (family, peer groups, forms of organised leisure, etc.) but also quite distinct from the everyday life experienced by most adults. It nurtures and promotes a very specific set of values, which are very unequally shared in society according to one's social and schooling background. Last but not least, school gives pupils aspirations according to their ability to acquire school titles and the rights that are linked to them.

So how should one understand the motivations of pupils who "choose" to stop school and look for an apprenticeship? First of all, it is important to take into account their perceptions, actions and assessments during their school experience. This is all the more so as after compulsory schooling, when the option of an apprenticeship becomes possible, youth in Switzerland are legally "free" to do whatever is possible for them because there is no longer any legal compulsion to do something specific. The vast majority of youth do not experience this freedom as such because their choices are much more restricted, when one takes into account their environment (parents who want their children to have an education or to work, peers with whom it is often only possible to socialize when one has money to spend, state institutions who only give support if one is committed to training or working) and because of their own desires and aspirations for the future. Through in-depth interviews with apprentices, we have been able to analyze, on the one hand, their motivations and perceptions and, on the other, the opportunities and obstacles they have encountered on their way. The latter help understand their desires and aspirations.

The aim is to better understand how future apprentices relate to school through their "practical sense" understood as "an almost corporal view of the world" (Bourdieu, 1980, 111) that underlies their perceptions, their assessments and their focus of interest. Children's practical sense is already strongly developed by the objective social relationships they have experienced through their family and social environment, especially the forms of cultural capital available to them. Their specific

form of practical sense and the cultural capital they have been able to acquire before and alongside school play a substantial role in their accepting to act and work according to the abstract rules, values and “games” (i. e. successfully understanding the multiple tasks taught and so acquiring the underlying knowledge) which school organises to make children work in the desired sense. For children and youth to act accordingly, they must non-consciously develop a “sense of play” coherent with the rules and demands of the school (teachers) where they acknowledge the importance of the games’ stakes (getting good grades, enjoying understanding an abstract piece of knowledge in the recognition that it will enable them to understand further knowledge, getting good school diplomas) and thus develop the *illusio* necessary to apply themselves regularly to school work, accepting the general rules and values of school as right and fair. We have observed that all of our interviewed apprentices sooner or later got seriously fed up with the sort of work or “games” school required them to do/play and thus with school as an institution with its very specific set of rules and values.

### 3 Selection and social inequalities in the VET-based Swiss educational system

To understand the following research results on the relationship of apprentices to schooling, it is necessary to briefly introduce some structural elements of the Swiss school, or educational, system.<sup>5</sup> The last three years of compulsory education are strongly structured by the post-compulsory differentiation of schooling/training between VET and full-time schooling. Already from the age of 12, pupils are segregated between better and less good students according to their school grades. The last three years of compulsory schooling are therefore spent in different classes according to the pupils’ school performance during the preceding “selection year”. Some cantons distinguish between two categories of pupils, but many distinguish three categories of pupils, “good”, “average” and “mediocre”. Of course no school officially qualifies them this way. This system can be summarized as being “highly selective and segregative” (Meyer, 2009). Cantons certify differently the school capital acquired by each pupil at the end of compulsory schooling. In some cantons there is an exam to obtain a “school certificate”. In others this certification is solely done through semi-annual school reports. The amount of school capital certified for each pupil depends on the grades recorded and on the school track followed during these last three years: “practical” (low-value track), “general” (medium-value track) or “baccalaureate” (high-value track). This is functional in regard to preparing a majority of pupils to quit school for company training after compulsory schooling, because the practical track hardly allows pupils to continue schooling and the general track often allows them to do so only within strict limits. But this organizational “en-

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5 See also Meyer, 2009.

couragement” of doing company-based training often matches the desires of young people, partly because of the numerous frustrations and/or difficulties experienced at school. They therefore can quite happily consider stopping full-time schooling for company-based VET, an apprenticeship.

VET remains a core element of the modern “massified” Swiss education system<sup>6</sup>. Following compulsory education, 51% of all youth pursue VET education in a company through an apprenticeship, 13% pursue VET education at school (with a training period at a company), 7% continue full-time schooling towards a school diploma allowing a limited choice of higher education, 19% continue schooling towards the Federal Matura (Baccalauréat) allowing access to all universities and polytechnical schools, and 10% do not obtain any post-compulsory diploma.<sup>7</sup> Because of selective procedures based on school certificates and school grades, only pupils with higher school capital can pursue further full-time schooling. On average, the more school capital has been acquired during compulsory schooling, the more chances a pupil has of opting for full-time schooling. This does not mean, however, that all those who opt for VET have low school capital, as our research results also show.

Finally, the Swiss educational system is also one of the most unequal education systems regarding the social background of pupils, as the PISA study has confirmed (OECD, 2005). Switzerland has the second largest gap (just behind Germany) in student performance between students from upper quarter socio-economic status and students from lower quarter status. This means that the reproduction of social inequalities by the school system seems to be particularly effective in Switzerland. Although hardly any research seems to have been pursued so as to understand exactly why these inequalities are so strong in Switzerland, we observe that they appear to be functional for a system expelling a majority of youth at an early stage from (predominantly) school education.<sup>8</sup>

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6 83% of youth in Switzerland between 20 and 24 years old have an upper secondary diploma (ISCED 3 and 4, see below) (OFS, 2005, p.11). On the concept of «massification», which is much more appropriate than that of «democratization», see *Mouvements* n°5 (1999)

7 Figures for the school year 2006/2007 from the Federal Office of Statistics, under [www.bfs.admin.ch](http://www.bfs.admin.ch) and synthesized by the author.

8 Of course, gender-related inequalities also play an important role in the schooling trajectories of pupils. They function however partly according to other logics than those analyzed here. This analytical distinction should not hide the fact that in society all social inequalities combine with each other. Two gender-related inequalities will be discussed: on average, women more often seem to underestimate the value of the school capital they have acquired; and they seem to have more difficulties seeing a professional perspective in acquiring higher school capital.

#### 4 Turning one's back on school: Swiss apprentices of the printing industry

All but one of the 25 interviewed apprentices work in the printing industry of western, French-speaking Switzerland. This industry is called the graphical industry in Switzerland and also includes graphic designing and layouting. Its VET education is almost exclusively provided through apprenticeships. Its main training programs are recognized as highly qualifying because they last four years (instead of three as a lot of apprenticeships do) and qualify for being either in charge of a printing machine or as a computer worker specialised in layouting. Field access to the apprentices was gained through teachers at the special graphical industry school of western Switzerland ("Eracom"). We then proceeded to interviewing friends of the interviewed who also trained in the graphical industry so as to gain access to apprentices who didn't volunteer when the teacher was involved.

Eleven of them have an apprenticeship as a printer, ten as a polygraph, two as graphic designers, one as a bookbinder and one as a logistics operator. These apprenticeships can be divided into two broad categories. On the one hand, as highly qualified "manual" workers, the printers learn how to use a printing press, which is a complex piece of machinery. The bookbinder and logistics operator can also be categorized as "manual". On the other hand the polygraphs learn to use computer programs (X-Press, Adobe Acrobat, ...) useful for layouting on a professional level. They are relatively more prestigious computer workers. Graphic designers are even more prestigious computer workers. Both young men and women are trained in equal numbers in this second category and we chose our interviewees accordingly. Apprentice printers are still overwhelmingly men. We nonetheless managed to interview three female printer apprentices.

Our main methodological inspiration has been the collective research effort that produced *La Misère du Monde* and especially Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical contribution therein (Bourdieu, 1993). The in-depth interview is conceived as a tool for the expression of the interviewee's socially situated viewpoint. The establishment of a certain relation of confidence and understanding between the researcher and his interviewee is essential. When successful, this method allows the interviewees "to seize the situation as an exceptional opportunity which is offered to testify, to make themselves heard, to bring their experience from the private into the public sphere; an opportunity also to *explain themselves*, in the most comprehensive sense – in other words to elaborate their own viewpoint on themselves and the world and to make it manifest as a part of this world from which they see themselves and see the world. They thereby become understandable and justified, above all for themselves." (Bourdieu, 1993, 1407–1408)

To make sense of these apprentices' heterogeneous particular experiences of school in geographically very diverse settings I propose the following typology, constructed by considering the combination of four different variables observed for each

interviewee: a) the amount of school capital acquired (especially institutionalised as a diploma); b) the amount of incorporated *illusio* necessary for doing continuous school work regularly over long periods of time; c) the social background of the parents; d) the type of apprenticeship obtained. We will describe each type and then illustrate them with four interviews, one for each type.

As our theoretical approach suggests these variables are closely correlated. We can distinguish the following four types of apprentices according to their relationship with school:

- 1 Those who from an early age on (younger than twelve) didn't really consider a successful school career, measured in higher value school diplomas. We call them "Distrustful" of the school form.
- 2 Those who caught on to several subjects taught at school and acquired some higher (institutionalized) form of school capital than the first group. Nonetheless, they were distinctly "Unsatisfied" with the school form.
- 3 Those who got good or very good school results during compulsory schooling. They got the best possible school certificate ("pre-baccalaureate school certificate") and some of them continued for a year or two at the higher post-compulsory schools leading to the Federal Matura. Nonetheless, they interrupted their school career and experienced this as a failure. They were "Disappointed" by the school form.
- 4 Those who succeeded in completing a fully recognized school career by obtaining the Federal Matura. Unlike those belonging to the other three types, these hardly ever become apprentices in Switzerland, their diploma allowing them to embark immediately on any higher (tertiary) education. By chance, one of the apprentices we interviewed (Elodie) belonged to this category. Although this exceptional trajectory (obtaining the Federal Matura and then starting an apprenticeship) is very interesting, especially regarding the support she had to succeed at school, it does not allow us to elaborate further on this type based on only one case<sup>9</sup>. We analyse her trajectory, however, alongside three others belonging to the other types.

Before we go on to analyze more specifically each type of apprentice, it is important to stress that all those interviewed are hard-working apprentices not complaining about the mandatory apprentice work-week, which is close to 45 hours, not counting overtime (work in the company, classes and homework) and where daily work in a company of the printing industry often starts around 7.15 am. They are also generally interested in learning and understanding facts, ideas, knowledge, know-how, be it for professional reasons or more generally to understand phenomena and

<sup>9</sup> In fact there is another apprentice who succeeded in having a full-blown school career but did so in France. She obtained a *baccalauréat littéraire*. However, because the whole school-system she went through was different from that of the other apprentices, we will not analyse her case here.

develop themselves. This allows to consider the fact that their distaste of school and the disruptive behaviour of some of them there cannot be explained by some deep personal disposition to laziness, unreliability or “destructiveness”, but by the way the school as an institution incarnated in specific agents and functioning in a partly contesting social environment<sup>10</sup> interacts with them and by the way this relationship evolves over time.

The three categories we outline indicate three different types of apprentices in respect to their past relationship to school. The apprentices interviewed divide up among these categories as follows: 10 can be considered Distrustful, 8 Unsatisfied and 5 Disappointed.

#### 4.1 The distrustful

Members of the first group, the Distrustful, never considered going on with school after compulsory schooling. Two of them even ended school without finishing all nine mandatory classes and without the school-leaving certificate graduating those who finish compulsory school. The others, however, ended their compulsory schooling in a so-called “lower secondary” or “practical” track with programmes summarised somewhat euphemistically as “fulfilling basic requirements” (Meyer, 2006, 3). This made the pursuit of further full-time schooling almost impossible for institutional reasons (they did not have the right diploma). Only one did a “middle track”, theoretically opening other possibilities. Apprentices of this type have thus acquired only low school capital. The one exception will be discussed below, but in any case she is very much convinced to have low school capital and thus underestimates herself.

At the same time none of them was at all interested in continuing school. For all of them, it went without saying that they would not continue school because they did not see the point of being good at school and/or because they never considered the usefulness of further education through school. Most of them were eager to work after ending school, which for all of them meant finding an apprenticeship. Two of them did not bother to take either school or work seriously. Instead, their main interest, even at the end of compulsory schooling, was socializing with friends of their peer group. Both had experienced quite strong changes giving rise to conflict in their childhood<sup>11</sup>. Most of the Distrustful put socialising with their peer group ahead of schoolwork and these were often conceived as contradictory activities. Time, energy and concentration were invested in peer-group socialization, often partly through criticism of school activities and their promoters, the teachers. This

10 Pierre Escofet analyzes the “breakdown of equilibriums” when like nowadays “the school system is affected by external dynamics without being able to subordinate them in accordance to its own fundamental dynamics” (Escofet, 2007, 444) in his thorough study of the impact of youth culture on pupils in the final years of compulsory schooling in the city of Geneva.

11 One was adopted from a foreign country at the age of 7, and one had to move to a small village in the mountains that she perceived to be very hostile and distrustful when she was only 10 years old.

is, however, something shared with some of the Unsatisfied and does not as such seem an explanation for their more unsuccessful school career.

All in all most of them found school an unpleasant place to have to go to. Here there is a strong positive correlation between low school capital and low school *illusio*<sup>12</sup>.

The parents of most of them have low qualifications. In particular, most of the mothers have no formal education beyond compulsory schooling or they stopped working for many years when having their child(ren) and are thus not career-minded. Some parents have better qualifications, but then substantial socio-economic obstacles have limited the transmission of dispositions necessary to succeed at school. In one case they are adoptive parents of a foreign born and raised son, in another a mother runs a jewellery store full-time in a household where the father has a full-time job and one daughter is mentally handicapped, in yet another household both parents have VET diplomas (federal certificates) but their professional activity (in a small local printing house) is culturally quite far away from that of a school culture, especially because of the absence of colleagues with higher education. To sum up, the social background of these apprentices had low legitimate cultural capital and/or its transmission was substantially hampered by complex inter-personal relationships.

As for the apprenticeships they follow, most of them are doing an apprenticeship as a printer, or in one case the lesser qualification of a logistic operator. Two apprentices are several years older and have managed to do apprenticeships as a graphic designer and polygraph. They are striking counter-examples but have been able to benefit both from substantial economic capital and the acquisition of highly developed dispositions to do a very good job at drawing or computer programming, thanks to a favourable social environment. Parents both with a university degree adopted one and the other is the son of a small-time businessman with a stimulating pluri-national background (Swiss and foreign).

## 4.2 The unsatisfied

The second group, the Unsatisfied, complied reasonably well with school expectations and obtained good enough school results to have the option of continuing schooling further on. They acquired a more substantial level of school capital. What distinguishes them from the third type, the Disappointed, is that they were adamant to stop school after compulsory schooling without feeling this to be a failure. Their motives were heterogeneous and stemmed from the specific forms of “practical

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12 There is one counter example of a boy who enjoyed working at school, helping his classmates and trying to get the best grades possible. However, he refused to develop his career at school and stayed in the lower secondary track barring him from further schooling, although his grades would have allowed him to move to a higher track. He is an interesting example of a good pupil stubbornly refusing to accept the potentialities of that status and thus having an incomplete form of school *illusio*.

sense” and dispositions they had acquired as well as the school environment(s) in which they grew up. What upset them was a combination of one or several of the following things: “sitting around all day at a desk, passively listening to a teacher”, having to study “uninteresting subjects”, feeling depreciated by teachers because of incomplete respect of the rules and/or in several cases the childish herd behaviour of peers. On the other hand, working “for real”, working with grown-ups and starting a professional career were very strong motivations to look for an apprenticeship conceived as a radical alternative to school. Underlying their “choice” was the failure of continued schooling to offer any desirable personal future. No worthwhile goal seemed visible at the end of a continued school career, whereas an apprenticeship seemed full of worthwhile opportunities from the start. It must be noted however, that each of them really appreciated some subjects taught at school, be it history, geography, maths or other subjects. This did not make them enjoy school as such, but they were able and willing to work well on specific subjects they found interesting. We can therefore say that they have acquired school *illusio* more substantially, especially in two quite specific forms: the acquisition of personal interest in some school subjects and that of dispositions enabling them to get good grades at least from time to time.<sup>13</sup>

The social background of this group is heterogeneous. One boy even has a father with a university degree. Overall, most of them have at least one parent with at worst a more school-type professional qualification, which means here that s/he is responsible in his/her job for a lot of paperwork. Some have a parent who had a successful school career. The one exception here is of a girl with a family background remote from school but whose parents have a very strong work discipline and a very strong practical sense of acquiring higher socio-professional status which they managed to transmit to their child, thus enabling her to achieve good grades at school despite her family background. It must be added that her father, who started from scratch, now runs a small family business employing 20 people.

All in all apprentices of this type have a social background compatible with the school form but without outstanding advantages. Some aspect or other of the school form is felt to be a major obstacle but not everything in school is experienced as a problem.

As for the type of apprenticeship followed, half the sample are printing apprentices and half polygraphs. Those having become printers lacked any supplementary resources to their average school capital except for one girl who wanted to do a qualified “manual” job even though she had quite good grades because of her relationship with her father who is a qualified worker. Those who became polygraphs had extra resources, be it higher than average school capital or having completed a

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13 Here too there is an exception. In one case a boy desperately tries to increase his low school capital to acquire the medium-level school certificate after compulsory schooling. In his case his school *illusio* is quite high but underdeveloped in his ability to carry on getting high enough grades.

different apprenticeship between compulsory school and their polygraph apprenticeship thanks to available economic capital in the family.

For this type of apprentices, the theory of reproduction as an analytical tool explains too little. It would be necessary to develop the study of this type of apprentices' relationship to school more precisely through examining the more detailed experiences they have had with the different dimensions of the school form.

### 4.3 The disappointed

The third group, the Disappointed had good results at the end of compulsory school obtaining the highest possible school certificate. They had acquired an important amount of school capital. All of them wanted to pursue their school career in a gymnasium (Matura school). None considered an apprenticeship before failing in their school career, which they all strongly felt as such.

Failure resulted from the combination of having gradually worse grades, sometimes repeating a year or two, feeling unable to continue school without having to work much more than before and the sense of a growing lack of purpose in going on with school. At compulsory school, they were quite proficient in doing their school work and thus able to obtain consistently good grades, although some had to work hard to do so. However most of them did not much enjoy the school subjects as such. This also helps to explain why school work did not seem rewarding enough for them in the end. They had quite a lot of school *illusio* but not enough to continue school on the longer term.

Most of them are from a working class background in terms of cultural capital. Their parents are not at all familiar with higher education, although they have some professional education. However in one case both parents have university degrees, but the boy had a lot of difficulties obtaining good grades—even though he worked hard. He did not get much support at school and through the peer group he was tempted not to care so much for school results. This is another case that cannot be explained by the dynamic of reproduction and where the social factors involved must be explained by a more specific study of the way he related to the school form and the peer group. Finally, all the parents of these pupils hoped that they would do well at school and that they would continue their school career. All were disappointed that they did not succeed. But either the parents did not have the tools (cultural capital) to make their wish come true, or they did not manage to transmit their dispositions to do successful schoolwork to their child.

As for the type of apprenticeship taken, three became polygraphs and one a graphic designer, i. e. highly qualifying and much sought after apprenticeships. In one case, an apprenticeship as a bookbinder was a well-thought-out choice because in the Swiss education system this was the only possibility to gain access to a very specific tertiary study. Apprentices of the Disappointed type could choose the sort of apprenticeship they wanted to do and get quickly hired thanks to their high school

capital but also maybe because of their relatively high school illu<sup>sio</sup>. Their experiences show here the important role school capital plays in company based VET.

## 5 Contrasting trajectories

To better distinguish our three types of apprentices' attitudes in practice towards school, we will give some insight into four specific school careers of Swiss pupils who continued their education by becoming apprentices. The four cases presented here are all women's trajectories, so as not to complicate the comparison with gender-related factors. Because of the smaller number of women interviewed (see above) it is a bit tricky to develop a general gender analysis with our empirical data. We will however mention some aspects below when discussing each case.<sup>14</sup> We have also included here the case of Elodie, the apprentice who fully succeeded her school career by obtaining the Federal Matura before looking for an apprenticeship, because of the very distinctive course her education took.

### 5.1 Cornelia (distrustful)

Cornelia grew up in an industrial mountain town. Her father works as a cook for an old people's home and was himself born in the same town. Her mother comes from the German-speaking part of Switzerland and married at 18. She had to learn French after marrying and moving to her husband's town. Although she had begun training to become a nurse, she did unqualified work assembling watches at home so as to earn some extra money and look after her children at the same time. They have hardly any school or legitimate cultural capital.

Cornelia did not enjoy school but she did not suffer from it either: "I went to school because it was there [to be gone to]. It was like something in life that has to be done. It's a bit like eating, things like that. For me it was a bit the same [she smiles]. It was a thing you just had to do." School had no intrinsic value for Cornelia. It was essentially a duty to be accomplished but it never seems to have been considered as the starting point of a career. On the other hand she had already inherited her parents' disposition to hard work because she did not fuss about going to school: "it had to be done". But she did not like to do her homework:

*Q: So you didn't always do your homework for school?*

Well no [she smiles]. I, well I did it but when I could, I avoided it. A believer in the line of least resistance [she laughs]. If I could avoid doing too much I didn't do so much. I did what really had to be done."

<sup>14</sup> Of our four types, only the Unsatisfied are evenly split between women and men. Only (two) women interviewed began an apprenticeship after having successfully finished their school career. Women are however under-represented amongst the interviewed Distrustful (2 in 10) and the Disappointed (1 in 5).

Cornelia resented being pushed by teachers and her parents to work harder, to put more effort into schoolwork so as to get better grades. She did not see the point of it and she was already independent-minded enough not to like people (teachers, parents) pushing her along for no good reason.

She liked handicrafts and drawing. These activities are relatively atypical to the school form (which explains why they are not really considered school capital) and often liked by the “Distrustful” apprentices. However she also liked French very much, which is linked to her disposition to read fiction as a hobby she developed as soon as she had learnt to read. And she liked history. But maths was much too abstract: “There wasn’t the practical example of life. Because once I started my apprenticeship they showed that the rule of 3 is very easy to calculate discounts. That’s something you understand when you begin to earn your money and you have the practical example. When it’s abstract, it can be very difficult.” Cornelia had good enough grades to be directed to the middle track, of which she obtained the school certificate. Going to the higher track was never even considered, and she managed well enough for the lowest track to appear too easy.

There was no doubt for her parents and herself that she would do an apprenticeship:

“What [my parents] saw for me was at any rate an apprenticeship because they didn’t have the means to send me to a university or whatever. That was absolutely clear.” In her case, the difference between earning a (very small) wage as an apprentice or having to pay tuition for continuing school was a decisive factor. This is confirmed by the fact that she is one of the few apprentices interviewed who gave some money to her parents for board and lodging. Cornelia did a printer’s apprenticeship that she enjoyed very much.

## 5.2 Nicole (unsatisfied)

Nicole grew up on the outskirts of a small town on the Lake of Geneva. Her father was a schoolteacher and her mother is a secretary. School capital was thus high at home. But her family had several distinctive characteristics which hampered the transmission of resources, especially of the father, and which exemplify how reproduction of school capital can malfunction. Her father is much older than her mother (he is over 80 now) and moved out when Nicole was ten. She has had no contact with him in years. She grew up with two sisters and a brother who have been brought up by their mother.

She enjoyed school up to the 5th grade when she was ten. From the 5th to the 9th grade she did not like school any more.

“I came home from school and then I sat in front of the telly or I went to play outside but I think I never once opened a book. (...) One can say I hated school.” Even so, she managed well enough at school not to have to repeat a year and completed the middle school track without any difficulty. She managed to keep up good

grades in maths (algebra), a subject she liked. She was also interested in history, geography, sports (she did athletics outside school) and music. Her school *illusio* was thus important enough for her to enjoy several subjects and to get regularly good grades for some of them. She also enjoyed the social life at school very much. But in the end, although she passed her final exams without any problem, she was committed to not continuing school.

Nicole's father was no help at all from the 5th grade onwards because he had left the home. Her mother repeatedly told her she was confident Nicole could have managed the upper school track leading directly to gymnasium. Nicole herself agrees. "I also think that if I had really worked I could have managed the upper track. But honestly I have a lot of trouble to work [for school]. I have no motivation. That's also why I did not go on with school at the gymnasium. (...) It's true that I really have a lot of trouble to sit down in front of my [school] work and tell myself 'now you have to revise' and concentrate and work. It's true that it's quite difficult". So, even if Nicole had acquired useful dispositions towards schoolwork, she had a very strong feeling that it was often pointless and not worth the trouble. This was not a conscious "choice" of hers but on the contrary a non-conscious disposition whose development is linked to a chaotic emotional situation at home, where all the children were gifted for school but only the youngest daughter really managed a good school career. When the father left, the mother had to cope all alone, including by working a full-time job as a nurse on night-shifts, which left her barely any time and energy to invest in her children's school career: "she worked night shifts, being on duty [on the ward]. So she slept during the day. So it's true that, well she did not see us [her children] much. And, well, I did my homework, but [speaks softer] I did it just before I arrived in class. I told my mum I would do it, I went to my room and I did something else. She didn't notice much. And, I must also say that she did take care of four children all by herself. It's true she would have liked me to have As or Bs everywhere. But, ok, as long as I passed, she couldn't say much. She didn't say anything." Nicole managed to get hired for an apprenticeship that interested her, polygraph. However it was at the last possible moment (apprentices are hired for the beginning of August because of VET school classes), and she had acquired extra cultural and symbolic capital by doing an extra year at a pre-apprenticeship school. In other words, she had consolidated extra resources and also turned out to be lucky.

### 5.3 Jennifer (disappointed)

Jennifer went to school in an industrial mountain valley. Her father is a factory worker and her mother is a part-time saleswoman in a bakery who stopped working while Jennifer and her twin brother were small. School and legitimate cultural capital were scant at home. But Jennifer did well at school and had good grades: "I was not bothered by school. Well, I liked to learn, in my first year of gymnasium [too]"

She had no bad grades for any subject in compulsory school. She had acquired high school illuio thanks to favourable dispositions to the school form and constructive relationships with teachers. There was no doubt in her mind that she would go on with school at gymnasium, although that was mostly because she “had the grades and really did not know what to do” professionally. Her parents always told their children: “choose whatever you like to do. They never told us ‘you have to study’” after compulsory schooling. Jennifer did not know what to study at gymnasium, but she did not like economics, so she chose Latin. This subject was hard to learn and get interested in, even though she liked Roman history and mythology. She had had no idea beforehand what Latin meant as a subject or its significance for an educational career because it was completely foreign to her world. She managed to pass her first year, but in the second year she got worse grades and she did not see the point in working much harder to try to go on to the third year. She did not like Latin, maths and natural sciences at all anymore.

“And, with grades getting worse, I was less and less motivated to follow classes. I decided to look around to see if I could do something else. If there was something else I could be interested in.” She did not have any motivation left to pursue school. “I did not even know where I was going because I had no aim for after gymnasium, like wanting to be a lawyer or something [smiles].” A good friend of hers with the same feeling had already quit the gymnasium, which confirmed the (socially accepted) possibility of stopping school to take up an apprenticeship. Only after having decided she wanted to stop school did Jennifer try to find out what could interest her professionally. It took some time for her to find the apprenticeship she wanted – to be a polygraph. She then tried to get hired, which she managed quite quickly. Her high level of accumulated school capital helped her substantially. But it was a difficult, depressing period for her when she got stuck at school because it was a real failure for her. Jennifer became jealous of her twin brother, who managed quite well at gymnasium. He did not have doubts about studying because he had decided he wanted to become a doctor; he had a goal and working at gymnasium fulfilled a purpose. Jennifer resented most of all that they fulfilled unequally their parents’ expectations:

“Towards my parents it’s true that I told myself: ‘he wants to do medical school, and I don’t know what I want to do’. That wasn’t easy. I told myself: ‘he knows what he wants to do and I’m here and I don’t know what I want to do. I don’t know if I’ll find an apprenticeship place’. So like that it really wasn’t easy.

Q *Were you afraid to disappoint your parents?*

Yeah, a bit. Yes.”

#### 5.4 Elodie

Elodie obtained the Federal Matura before she started her apprenticeship. She grew up in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, in one of the most elitist cantons,

where only around 13% of any age group nowadays obtains the Federal Matura. Her father is an engineer with a diploma from the prestigious Federal Polytechnic School of Zürich (ETHZ) and runs his own small company. Her mother attended gymnasium before she married and had children. Years later she began to teach French, took courses to become a teacher and is now a French teacher in a VET school. Both parents enjoyed an important amount of school capital and more generally legitimate cultural capital. These were fully transmitted to Elodie from an early age on. Elodie's mother's resumption of a professional career is unique among the family histories of the apprentices interviewed and is testimony to an important school *illusio* of hers, wanting to become a teacher and then having the dispositions to get all the qualifications needed.

Elodie herself began the German-speaking school without speaking German, her parents speaking French at home. This made her first school years difficult, especially in German lessons. At age eleven in the selection school year, her school grades were just not good enough to enter the *Bezirksschule*, the specific cantonal institution of the upper school track leading to the gymnasium where one can obtain the Federal Matura. Nevertheless, the school made an exception for her and decided that she should be allowed to go to the *Bezirksschule*. This can be explained by her good grades in some subjects, her disposition to work hard at school so as to be able to do the job she wished to do (teaching), the fact that French would help her at the *Bezirksschule* to get more good grades and that she came from a family background with higher education and parents intent on her doing as well as possible at school and very familiar with all the rules and principles of the school form.

Working hard at school and getting better grades motivated her a lot to do even better, and she began to really enjoy her work for school when she started the *Bezirksschule*. She also engaged in several intensive organised social activities (girl scouts, swimming training, dance lessons) besides working occasionally for extra pocket money (baby-sitting and distributing newspapers). She developed these leisure and pre-professional activities while getting much better at school. Her results got much better and she finished compulsory schooling with very good results. She thus had a high school *illusio*, enjoying the subjects, enjoying doing schoolwork and getting constantly good grades. She had already acquired substantial school capital.

She had no idea what she wanted to do professionally when she got her school certificate and considered going to university. Above all she felt she needed to learn still more. The absence of any strong personal interest or ambition for after school (she did not want to become a teacher anymore) explains why her interest in her school career would waver. She started the gymnasium and did a very good first year, with good results she felt happy about. She also did several optional courses that added up to the 35 to 38 hours a week of regular school lessons. This is revealing because the other interviewed apprentices who had begun post-compulsory full-time schooling began quickly losing their school *illusio* whereas Elodie's was boosted again.

Her second year was an exchange year abroad (in the USA), where she was allowed to choose any courses she liked. She took those linked to media, photography and illustration (broadly speaking) and became very enthusiastic about photography. On coming back to Switzerland, she was allowed to go directly into her third year, although she had a lot of material to catch up with which she had hardly learned during her year abroad. She managed to catch up on everything during her third year, although she seriously considered stopping her study at the gymnasium to start an apprenticeship as a photographer (for which the Matura is not necessary). This did not work out because she could not find an apprenticeship job. Not only were there very few photographer apprenticeships but employers found her choice to stop her Matura study suspicious (“why doesn’t she finish the job?”) and insisted that she should obtain her Matura before embarking on an apprenticeship. A year before her Matura exams, she definitely accepted this idea, although meanwhile she had anyhow managed to obtain good school grades. In the end, she obtained her Matura easily and finished her school career brilliantly. Thanks to a well-developed school *illusio* enabling her to interest herself in all school subjects and learning efficiently enough to get good grades even in the most demanding of circumstances, Elodie managed to obtain the Federal Matura, even though she had already decided to pursue her training with an apprenticeship for which she did not need the Matura. In the end she took an apprenticeship as a polygraph that interested her too.

## 6 Conclusion

Our case studies have confirmed the importance of the family socio-economic background for the educational career of youth. We have been able to observe how social reproduction through legitimate cultural capital taught through the school form helps to explain the educational careers of those young people in Switzerland who pursue their careers with an apprenticeship. This confirms again that the school system fails to function as a meritocratic system. Instead, through its own functioning in relationship to its pupils (considered each as a system of dispositions and developing her-his own “practical sense” according to the objective social environment s-he grows up in), it produces the aversion to school which plays a part in the “choice” of an apprenticeship career. The way school unequally awards its pupils and stimulates or hampers their school *illusio* is coherent on a global scale with the social reproduction of inequalities, especially for those pupils who enjoy either high or low legitimate cultural and school capital at home. But to understand how this works out for pupils with more complex or mixed social backgrounds, neither lacking nor really familiar with legitimate cultural and school capital, analyzing the role played by their relationship to the different dimensions of the school form seems crucial. VET appeals as being part of “real life”, distinct from the school form, enabling one

to earn one's own income and quickly acquire one's own recognised place in social space, with the status of a recognized worker. This professional status builds one's identity both in the firm as in society as such. The school form does not ensure that and it is not its primary purpose. For many pupils the problem is what they feel as a chasm between school and themselves with their capacities, desires and aspirations. These they then try to realize through VET. The problem for many of them is the practical importance of school capital, linked with the acquisition of school *illusio*. They play a significant role during VET and later during their professional career and they greatly influence what type of apprenticeship is possible for them, the type of promotions available, the ability to handle problems on the shop floor but also simply to succeed their apprenticeship.

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