

Education in France: the difficult balance between excellence and equality

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I Introduction

Before the French Revolution (1789), education was under the responsibility of the Catholic Church. Boys were attending schools operated by congregations for men, while girls were attending schools run by sisters. The majority of pupils were children of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Very few children of lower classes (farmers and manual workers), were enrolled in schools.

The French Revolution has introduced new principles in the system. First, it has declared the **responsibility of the state** in the provision of education opportunities. Second, it has stressed the ideal of **equal access for all** to education (although it was less clear that girls had exactly the same rights as boys). Third, it has introduced the idea that the **language of instruction should be French**, and that all local dialects should be removed from the school system. This principle derived from the 18th century enlightenment movement, which was fighting against the willingness of the Catholic Church to “protect” ordinary believers from new ideas, possibly ideas contesting some aspects of the religious faith and values. Religious schools thought that by being taught in local dialects, people would be unable to read undesirable material produced and printed in French.

The ideals of the French Revolution have not been immediately implemented, first because a new order occurred rapidly with the Napoleons regime, and later on with the “restoration” monarchic regime, and second because the capacity for implementing the new principles was simply missing: insufficient public budget, lack of human resources, especially teachers, and determination of the Catholic Church for maintaining its pre-revolution positions.

The Catholic Church was active in two ways: first, it had a network of schools run by “congregations” which was developed in the previous centuries, and these schools used to belong to the concerned congregation, and provided relatively often boarding facilities. But the Church was also present in the public schools created by municipalities, because municipalities could hire as teachers catholic sisters in girl schools, or clergymen in boys schools (in 1865, about 55% of public schools for girls were operated by sisters, and 25% of public boys schools were run by clergymen).

Nevertheless, the nineteenth century has been characterized by a constant increase of education opportunities, with both church and municipal schools spreading all over the country. The movement was quicker in cities than in rural areas, where a certain proportion of farming households have seen schooling as unnecessary inputs to become a good farmer, and also a handicap for using children as farming aids on the family exploitation.

In the middle of the century, there were about 14000 primary schools for girls, about 38000 schools for boys, and 18000 coeducation schools, mostly in small villages where the number of school age children was too low to justify a school for each gender. (In these coeducation schools, it was frequent to have a curtain in the middle of the classroom to separate girls from boys). The total number of schools, 70000, is about twice the number of municipalities (36000), which means that relatively few villages were without any school at all (about 15% in the thirties, and 1% in the seventies). In some villages, both a congregation school and a public school used to operate simultaneously; in a larger proportion of villages, there was only a public school, and in small proportion a congregation school had the monopoly.

Two regions were more intensively covered by congregation schools, namely Brittany and the Vendée (both on the west side of France). This situation has survived up to the present period.

Schooling participation has increased all over the country during the 19th century, but the Northern half of France has always shown a higher participation. This pattern is likely connected with a more dynamic economic evolution, characterized by a more intense migration movement from rural to urban areas, an industrial development significantly more active, and a higher rate of productivity growth in agriculture. It is difficult to say what the chicken is and what is the egg, as far as one can argue both that economic development is strengthened by a more qualified human capital, but also that economic development is liberating resources to finance education and accelerating demand for education.

At the end of the century, in the early eighties, more than 90% of school age children were attending school. Children not attending school were not prevented to do so by a lack of provision of school seats, but were mostly the victims of a low household demand for education. Since 1871, the political regime was a Republic (the third one), and the political majority was opposed to what was seen as an excessive implication of the church in education. The Minister of education of that time, Jules Ferry, introduced in 1882 a new legislation, which has constituted a major turning point in the evolution of the French education system, and which is still shaping the system today, 120 years later. This legislation was based on three basic principles: **schooling is declared as compulsory, free of charge, and secular**. Congregation schools are not forbidden, but they do not receive public funding, while teachers in public schools are not any longer sisters or clergymen, but lay people trained in public teacher training colleges. Each regional unit called “département”¹ has its own teacher training colleges, one for male teachers and since 1879, one for female teachers². These colleges have had an instrumental role for developing the standards of the famous “Third Republic School”, because they have spread a homogenous conception concerning the values, the pedagogy and the curriculum in all French primary schools. One can say that the reputation of the French education system with respect to centralization was born at that time, and that the most efficient tool for conveying this ideology has been the teacher training colleges (Ecoles Normales³) and the status of civil servant given to teachers, civil servants paid from the central state budget⁴.

In addition, the Ecoles Normales have disseminated a strong pro secular philosophy, and a feeling that the republican school was in competition with the schools operated by the church and the congregations. As a matter of fact, they have developed an anticlerical identity which has survived during the whole 20th century.

¹ A “département” is a geographical unit created during the French revolution to replace all units based on aristocratic ownership. There are about 100 départements in France, which have a relatively homogenous size (5000 to 6000 square kilometres on average)

² The setting up of female teacher training college was made compulsory by a law introduced by Paul Bert.

³ The Ecoles Normales, in which preschool and primary teachers were trained from 1879, have been replaced in 1991 by a new teacher training institution, the IUFM (Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres). While Ecoles Normales were independent from universities, and used to train teachers in one year after the baccalaureate, IUFM are associated to a university, and provide 2 years of training to future teachers, and recruit the students after three years of university education.

⁴ Before 1882, teachers were relatively poorly paid. In the middle of the century, a cook was paid about 700 francs per year, while a teacher was paid much less. Sisters supported by municipalities were paid only 344 francs, and female lay teachers no more than 481 francs. The minister of education Duruy passed a law fixing the minimum female teacher salary to 441 francs, and for male lay teachers to 778 francs.

This opposition has been extended on the political scene. Political parties from the right used to stand on the side of Catholic schools, while political parties from the left were leaning on the side of public schools. This fighting for extending the role of each side at the expense of the other culminated in 1905 with a famous law instituting the separation of the church and the state that still organises the nature of relations of religion with the public domain. Under the same law, all religious properties, including the churches themselves, were confiscated by the state.

After 1905, the role of the Catholic Church in the running of primary schools has rapidly declined, and homogenous “republican“ schools have spread all over the country, with a few exceptions in the west part of France.

It is generally recognised that the quality of this model of school was rather remarkable. As it was free of charge, all children, even those from low socio-economic background, had access to a quality primary education. Teachers were seen as dedicated and competent, although a large proportion was sharing actively an anticlerical attitude that was not always appreciated by parents who had strong religious convictions. School choice at that time, when it was possible, was not primarily based on perceived quality differences, but on the willingness to avoid exposure of children to a “biased” ideology, namely anticlericalism and in some cases militant atheism. The free mason movement was relatively well represented among teachers, and in the French context, free masonry was actively involved in the dissemination of anti-Catholic values.

Teachers were recruited after the first cycle of secondary education (junior high school), and during the first three years, the Ecoles Normales used to provide senior secondary education in order to prepare and pass the baccalaureate. They were boarded and used to receive a scholarship, and for talented pupils from low socioeconomic background, it was seen as a promising way of having access to a social promotion. It is clear that the system was quite efficient for infusing a certain vision of the world common to all, and for facilitating the avoidance of a possible counterinfluence of the family.

II Education changes after the Second World War: democratisation of access to secondary and tertiary education

1) Democratization of the system

No major change has occurred between the Jules Ferry’s laws and the Second World War. Every child was attending school up to 14, namely seven years of basic education, and after 14, the large majority used to go on the job market, as apprentices or family aids (in rural areas). Only a small minority used to go to secondary education (less than 10%), which was not free, and for which the role of the church was still significant. In the thirties, secondary education was declared free to allow the access of children of low socio-economic background, although the number of seats remained extremely limited and the access based on merit.

Real changes occurred after the Second World War, with the development of junior secondary education in the fifties. This evolution can be associated with the publication of a famous

report, the so-called “Plan Langevin-Wallon”⁵, after the names of its two writers. The Langevin-Wallon project was very ambitious, as far as it wanted to open the access to secondary education, both junior and upper high school, to all. Selection would occur only for tertiary education. The basic concept of the report was democratisation and justice, and it has had a strong influence on the development of the French education system during the whole second half of the 20th century.

Such a programme had enormous financial implications. The number of new pupils to enrol in French schools represented a twofold increase, and in spite of the centralized tradition of France, local authorities were encouraged to take initiative for opening new junior secondary schools. The staffing of these schools was also quite a challenge, and a large number of primary teachers have been promoted to teach in junior secondary schools.

The development of junior secondary schools has followed a model based on three different categories of institutions: the first category was based on the previous model of elitist secondary schools, in which both junior and senior secondary schools are merged together. Teachers are specialized in one or two fields of study, and have followed a university education in these fields. The second category was made of specialized junior high schools (not linked to a senior one). They were using a large proportion of primary teachers, as mentioned above, and enjoyed a slightly lower status than the first category. The last category was preparing pupils to professional training, which means that general education was relatively of a lower quality, and therefore they were seen as having a lower status than the two first categories.

In the late fifties, with the arrival of the General de Gaulle at the presidency, the implementation of the plan was accelerated, and a certain recentralisation has started: the majority of municipal secondary schools previously created have been integrated in the national education system, under the direct management of the Ministry of Education. The three tracks have been preserved, but the second category became the most important one, because the number of senior secondary schools was not expanding at the same pace.

The names of the three tracks have changed, while the professional track has been postponed by two years: all pupils started junior secondary with two years of general education, and those enrolled in the professional track moved from general to professional training for the two last years of junior secondary. The two general tracks remained separated by the fact that teachers had different training backgrounds. And finally, attending school was made compulsory up to 16 in 1959 (Berthoin law).

The next step occurred in 1975, under the presidency of Giscard d’Estaing, from the centre right, and the new reform is known after the name of the minister of education of that time, Mr Haby. The main purpose of the Haby reform was to remove the three tracks for setting up a supposedly homogeneous curriculum for all children, whatever their socio-economic background or their schooling achievement in primary education. The implementation of the reform has been uneven with respect to each junior high school. A school belonging to the second track, with a large proportion of primary teachers in the teaching staff, could not become the equivalent of a first track overnight, because the university educated teachers of the first track were not immediately available. A transition period took place, with practices which have de facto maintained a tracking system. These practices can be described in the

⁵ Allègre, Dubet, et Meirieu, 2004 « Le rapport Langevin-Wallon » Editions Mille et une Nuits, Paris 127p, ISBN 2-84205-814-3

following way: a junior secondary school which has enough pupils in the same grade for organising several streams had the choice to allocate the pupils in the different streams randomly or not randomly. Some did it randomly, and some others (actually the majority) did not. Pupils could be assigned to a class according to their previous achievement in primary school (this practice was in principle forbidden, but was applied in an implicit manner), or according to their wishes in terms of optional subjects (this approach was officially accepted). As a consequence, families wishing to have their child in a class behaving de facto like the previous elitist track were simply asking a range of options which recreated the system of differentiated tracks. For example, it was known that a class offering Latin and German instead of English and Spanish was likely to have higher standards. An other approach was through the allocation of teachers. The best teachers in each subject could be assigned to the best classes, while the low performing teachers could be concentrated in low achieving classes. Well informed parents were obviously aware of these biases, and used to make lobbying with schools authorities for having their children in classes with highly performing teachers. This trick was particularly well known from the teachers themselves, whose children, in the French system, used to have the highest performances. There is a say which claims that bad teachers are those who never have in their class the children of their colleagues.

The issue of having differentiated classes for high achievers on the one hand, and low achievers on the other, is a permanent debate on the French scene. Partisans of randomly assigned pupils to each class at a given grade claim that it has a beneficial effect on low achievers, who have higher and more challenging references (because they have all types of classmates, including some gifted ones). But this benefit may be produced at the expense of the performances of high achievers. France has not set up a system which monitors the school career of gifted students. Gifted students have therefore the possibility of being assigned to better classes when it exists, or to be randomly assigned to heterogeneous classes, depending upon the practices of the school in which they are enrolled.

2) Public and private schools

In spite of the secular legislation introduced in the late nineteenth century, and the separation of the church from the state adopted in 1905, the competition and the frustrations created by the coexistence of public and private schools have persisted during the third (1871-1940) and the fourth Republics (1945-1958). One of the major causes of frustration on the side of private schools used to be the question of funding. Private schools were funded from fees paid by parents, while public schools were funded by the taxpayers. When private secondary schools had a major role in terms of enrolment of pupils from wealthy families, the question of fees did not raise a sensitive issue. Parents were able to pay. But the democratisation of access has been satisfied increasingly by public schools, and private schools were less and less able to face the competition of free public schools. The arrival of the general de Gaulle at the presidency has reduced the power of anticlerical lobbies, and de Gaulle's minister Michel Debré has successfully introduced a new legislation for private schools in 1959.

This legislation has opened two avenues for private schools: they could choose a status based on a "contract" with the Ministry of Education, in which they accept to follow a certain number of regulations similar to those which apply to public schools, or they can remain entirely free, but without public funding. If they opt for the "contract", they can integrate their teaching staff on the payroll of the Ministry of Education. The majority of public teachers are civil servants. They are recruited through a competitive exam which opens the door to a status

that warrants life tenure as teacher. But they can also be recruited on a contract basis. In this case, they have a slightly lower salary, and they are not entitled some of the privileges of civil servants. Teachers working in private schools have a status close to the “contract” status of public teachers. The vast majority (more than 99%) of private schools have accepted the contract status, and have therefore solved their funding problem thanks to the Debré legislation. They are still responsible for funding the buildings and their maintenance, but this is easily covered by relatively modest fees.

The Debré law can be interpreted as a victory of the Catholic Church lobby, and symbolically as a defeat of the anticlerical one. When a leftist president, François Mitterrand, close to the anticlerical side, came to power in 1981, the Minister of Education, Alain Savary, prepared a new legislation for integrating private schools funded from the state budget under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education (in 1984). This nationalisation project was strongly opposed by catholic groups, but also by a large coalition of lobbies who wanted to preserve the existing dualism. This social movement led to impressive public protests which forced the Mitterrand government to cancel his nationalisation project. Did this massive opposition mean that the catholic lobby had gained a stronger social influence in France? Not necessarily. France has become a country in which catholic practice is very low (less than 10% of the population). Therefore, it is difficult to interpret the opposition to the Savary project as a signal of religious revival. The main reason for this unexpectedly strong opposition has to be seen in the willingness of a large fraction of the French public opinion to preserve one of the great advantages of the present system, namely the possibility of a certain level of school choice. Many parents who used to send their children in public school see private schools as a second chance when the public school attended by a given child leads to a failure. While the present share of private school is more or less stabilized to 20% of total enrolments, more than 35% of pupils attend a private school at some point of their school life. Incidentally, the small school network managed by the Ministry of Agriculture plays a similar role, as far as less than one third of its pupils are originating from an agricultural family, and as far as a large proportion does not plan to become farmer.

3) Preschool policy

Few countries have developed a system of pre-primary education as widespread as the French one. Every child is entitled a free seat in a preschool when he is 2 years old. That means that at the start of the school year, middle of September, children born between January and September two years earlier can register, namely about two thirds of pupils born that year. Half of them are effectively enrolled, which means that the schooling ratio is about 30% for children who are two years old. It reaches 100% for children who are three, four and five years old. It is not compulsory, but widely appreciated by French parents, who overwhelmingly support the system. Actually, the system fits perfectly the needs of working mothers, because it caters for young children from 8h30 in the morning to 4h30 in the afternoon. It has a possible extension before and after this schedule for parents who can not manage otherwise, under the supervision of non teaching staff.

Preschool teachers follow the same type of training as primary teachers, and they can be assigned to both levels. Besides the social advantage for working mothers, the preschool system is playing an important role for socializing children, particularly children whose parents have immigrated in France and have a poor mastering of the French language. For these children, attending preschool is an excellent preparation for primary education where French is the unique language of instruction.

Some studies have also shown that attending preschool brings long term advantages in the school career of pupils. All other things equal, a child having attended preschool performs better in primary education than a child who has not attended. And this advantage seems to last all over the duration of primary education. One can therefore assume that preschool attendance stimulates some basic acquisitions in the French context. However, it must be said that French primary pupils who have participated to international pupil achievement surveys have not always performed better than pupils from countries where preschool education is not organised. This result could indicate that preschool attendance is not the only way to stimulate pupils of this age. Some alternative solutions exist, who may be cheaper than the French approach.

4) The expansion of senior secondary education.

The Langevin-Wallon project had proposed that the democratisation process would not be limited to junior high school, but also to senior high school, assuming that school attendance would be compulsory up to the age of 18. This aspect of the Langevin-Wallon project has been ignored for a long period. Access to senior secondary has been selective up to the Mitterrand years, in the early eighties. It has been the initiative of the Minister of Education Chevènement to introduce a new objective for expanding senior secondary education. The new objective set up by Chevènement was a participation rate for the last year of senior secondary of 80%. It must be reminded here that the last year of senior secondary is the time when a French pupil prepares a key exam, the Baccalaureate, which opens the door to tertiary education.

The label baccalaureate was traditionally reserved to general education, namely tracks where the major fields of study were either mathematics and sciences, either humanities, or social sciences. But other tracks, such as the one for technical education or that for professional training, were excluded from the baccalaureate label. In order to give more attractiveness and prestige to both the technical tracks and the professional training ones, the label “baccalaureate” has been also given to them. This label had the immediate and automatic effect of conferring to non general tracks a free access to tertiary education. Before the introduction of this new labelling, about 40% of a given cohort used to pass the baccalaureate and to enrol in tertiary education. After the reform, the proportion of baccalaureate holders increased significantly to slightly more than 60% (the 60% threshold was reached in the early nineties, and it has remained more or less stable during the past ten years, namely between 60 and 62%, according to the year). Unlike pupils holding a general baccalaureate, technical baccalaureate holders, and even more professional baccalaureate holders, do not apply systematically for entering tertiary education. Some do, but some go directly on the job market. Approximately half a generation is presently entering in tertiary education, while 60% could theoretically do it.

5) Decentralisation process and management of the system

The Mitterrand years have also been the moment for introducing a limited dose of decentralisation. Traditionally, the Ministry of education is in charge of managing, funding and evaluating all education institutions, from preschool to universities. Even private schools have to refer to the Ministry, and are linked to the ministry through a contract. France has always been considered has a model of centralized education system. With more than 1

million staff on its payroll, the Ministry of education is often referred to as the second biggest employer worldwide, after the red army.

Nevertheless, this somewhat caricatured picture requires some refinement. When the Jules Ferry laws of 1882 have set up the principles of free, secular and compulsory primary education, the state has recruited and paid all teachers, but has left the responsibility of building and maintaining preschools and primary schools buildings to municipal authorities. If municipal authorities have difficulties to fund new schooling facilities, they can receive transfers from the central budget (or they can borrow on the financial market). However, the bulk of the school budget is made of teachers' salaries, and this is still centrally paid.

When secondary schools have been developed in the fifties and the sixties, many of them have been created at the initiative of municipal authorities, which has constituted an efficient way of accelerating the process. But progressively, these municipal secondary schools have been taken over by the Ministry of education (mostly in the sixties and the seventies). Outside primary school maintenance, there was a second responsibility left to local authorities, namely the organisation of free public transportation for secondary pupils (most of those leaving in rural areas had to attend the nearest urban school, and they are carried by a public transport system funded by the Départements).

In 1982, new laws called "decentralisation laws" have been adopted by the Parliament, under the initiative of a Mitterrand's minister, Deferre. These laws have given new education responsibilities to the regions and to the départements, but not to the communes⁶. Actually, the co-sharing system between the communes and the central government which existed since the late nineteenth century for primary schools has been extended in the following way: the départements receive the responsibility of maintaining junior secondary schools, and the regions the responsibility of senior secondary schools and some adult training programmes. As for primary schools, all staff (both teaching and non teaching) remains on the payroll of the Ministry of education⁷.

One can wonder why education staff can not be decentralised. Here is one of the long term peculiarities of the French education system, namely the role and the influence of trade unions. Teachers are one of the professions having the highest unionisation rate in the country, and they have acquired a strong decision making power within the Ministry. It is often said that they "co-manage" the ministry of education whatever the political affiliation of the minister, and it is extremely difficult to introduce a reform which is not endorsed by their union. The exclusion of staff from the decentralisation laws is mainly the outcome of a strong opposition from the teacher unions.

As a consequence, the decentralisation process in France can be seen as modest, as far as it represents less than 10% of public education expenditure. One can conclude that after the decentralisation, France education system remains one of the most centralised in the world.

⁶ There are three levels of public authorities below the central level in France. The département is described in foot note 1 page 2. Below the département, one has the "commune", or municipality, of which there are about 36000 in France, a large proportion of them being very small, in rural areas. Above the département, one has the region, the most recent one, created in 1956. Most regions are made of 4 départements, and there are 24 of them. The creation of regions has not led to a change in the responsibilities of départements. Many observers think that France has now too many levels of public management, and also too many communes.

⁷ There is a current debate (in 2004), for transferring non teaching staff of junior secondary schools to départements, and non teaching staff of senior secondary schools to regions. This project is fiercely opposed by their unions.

6) Tertiary education

Tertiary education was born in the medieval period with the creation of the first university in Paris, the Sorbonne. New universities have been subsequently created in different cities. The French revolution has suppressed universities and created instead specialised professional schools, mostly to produce highly qualified engineers in different trades, but also in humanities with institutions such as the “Ecole Normale Supérieure”⁸. They are known under the label “Grandes Ecoles”, which is a unique peculiarity of the French higher education system. They have a severe selection policy for enrolling students, which means that they have permanently recruited the most promising students of each generation. Besides the Grandes Ecoles, during the nineteenth century, there were “Facultés”, which were each specialized in one of the four following domains: law, medical studies, sciences and humanities. They were not merged under the umbrella of a “university”. The word university reappeared in 1896, but without formal common administrative unit. If a city had the four “facultés”, they were called the University of that City, but that did not mean more in terms of transversal cooperation: “facultés” remained entirely autonomous, and were dealing each directly with Ministry of Education in Paris for setting up their budget.

While Grandes Ecoles were allowed to select the best candidates, facultés and later on universities were not. They had the legal obligation to enrol all candidates holding the baccalaureate. This obligation has not been a real issue as long as the number of baccalaureate holders was limited to a small percentage of a given generation, and during the nineteenth century and the first half of the 20th century, this number was approximately 5% of each cohort. Facultés used to deliver “national” diplomas, namely diplomas recognized by the French State. Whatever the faculté where you learn law or medicine, the degree which is won has the guaranty of the Government. There is not such a concept according to which a law degree acquired in Paris or Bordeaux could have a higher value than the same degree obtained in Dijon or Marseille. As a consequence, it was perfectly rational for a student to attend the Faculté close to its residence, in order to avoid unnecessary travel and lodging costs.

The problems have started to grow in the sixties, with the democratisation of secondary education and the multiplication of baccalaureate holders. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the number of students has been multiplied twenty fold, and in spite of the creation of new universities, the overcrowding was impossible to avoid. In addition, the capacities of the students became more and more diversified and uneven. As a consequence, the proportion of students unable to meet the requirements for passing their degree has increased, and the “efficiency” of the system has continuously deteriorated.

The most spectacular event which took place during this period was the 1968 phenomenon, which pushed students to organize huge protests in the streets during the whole month of May, to occupy universities, to stop lecturing, and to oblige the government to introduce a university reform. Students were motivated by two different categories of objectives. First, they wanted the suppression of a series of archaisms and rigidities in the operation of universities, and they wanted to be more closely associated in the decision making process and the running of their university. The second objective was not related to the management of universities; it was related to the society as a whole, in particular a strong political

⁸ The Ecole Normale Supérieure is an elite school for humanities, while most Grandes Ecoles are specialized in engineering studies or business administration. It used to train highly qualified teachers for senior secondary schools, but also any elite professional career.

opposition to capitalism, in favour of revolutionary changes at the head of the State. The second objective failed, because the French population was called later on to vote for a new Parliament and eventually for a new government, which led to a rightist majority significantly stronger than in the previous chamber.

The university reform which was subsequently adopted in November 1968 is known after the name of the education minister of that time, Edgar Faure. The four categories of “Facultés” which used to be the main managing units (law, humanities, sciences and medical studies), were invited to discuss together in order to create multidisciplinary universities, with a unified management body. All combinations have been utilized. In small cities, the four facultés have merged together in order to create a unique multidisciplinary university, which is the standard model worldwide. In big cities, where each faculté used to be already very large, as in Paris, most facultés decided to become universities without merging with another one. In middle sized cities, two or three universities have been set up by merging two former facultés, or by merging parts of two to three existing facultés. It has been common, for instance, that a Faculté of law decided to split into two parts, one part dominated by rightist interest groups merging with part of a medical Faculté, while the leftist part would merge with the humanities Faculté. This process led to the creation of about 80 universities, without changing some basic principles such as non selective access for all baccalaureate holders, absence of fees, national diplomas, and central management of teaching staff.

The second series of changes is related to the management bodies set up for organising the daily life of the university, with the participation of student representatives. An administrative council is in charge of budget management and key decision making, a student life council is in charge of facilitating the routine relations between students and the institution, and a research council is in charge of fixing the research policy of the university.

Surprisingly, the reform has not led to significant real changes. Students have not participated actively in the election of their representatives, which means that those who are elected (by about only 5 to 10% of registered students due to a huge absenteeism in the voting process), are not really representative of students. They belong to activist groups, and they have little influence in the decisions which are taken. The head of the university is a “president”, who is elected by the councils for five years, and can not have a second mandate (to avoid excessive power from strong personalities). As a matter of fact, strong personalities are rarely involved in this business, which, incidentally, is poorly rewarded financially. The main decision making power is still in the hands of the Ministry of Education, who decides for the diplomas, the budget and the number of staff. The second important line of power is still in the hands of the disciplines, which means that the objective of stimulating multidisciplinary approaches has failed, and that new fields of study are extremely difficult to introduce. The rigid disciplinary tradition of French universities has been preserved.

Apart from the 1968 reform, French tertiary education has been affected by a series of reform generated by the Ministry of Education. The majority of these reforms had an objective of preparing students for the labour market, namely they were trying to introduce more vocational oriented courses and diplomas. The first attempt is the training of middle level technicians, after two years of study. This training is done by a new type of institution, the Instituts Universitaires de Technologie (IUT). These institutes are part of a given university, but enjoy a special status in terms of autonomy and in terms of direct relations with the Ministry of Education. They are allowed to select students, which has had the outcome of attracting students on average more competent than those entering the other departments of

the university. Initially, they were intended to enrol students holding a technical baccalaureate, providing a more practical approach of the curriculum. Actually, they have attracted students holding a general baccalaureate, and they missed their objective. France is a rare example where non university tracks attract students who are more qualified than those entering universities.

An other track, called the IUP (Institut Universitaire Professionnalis ) is providing a vocational curriculum for a four year degree instead of two years for the IUT. IUPs can also select their students from the first graders in standard departments. And finally, the French equivalent of the master degree, intended to enrol future PhD students, has been dubbed by a parallel vocational track called the DESS (Dipl me d'Enseignement Sup rieur Sp cialis ), not leading to a PhD. The vocationalisation of higher education has been pursued actively, in a way successfully, but has constantly generated a perverse effect, in that sense that the new tracks have attracted the most able students, and left the least able for enrolling in degree programmes, and finally in PhD programmes.

III Contemporary debates on education future developments

1) Pre-tertiary education

- *Quality of pupil achievement: the declining ranking of French pupils in international surveys*

France has regularly participated to international surveys on cognitive achievements of pupils and students. It has obtained irregular ranking, but on the whole, it has performed relatively well, especially in reading capacities and in mathematics. It has been less efficient in natural sciences, especially in the Third International Mathematics and Sciences Survey (TIMSS), in which France ranked poorly.

In the nineties, the OECD has carried out a new survey in which the level of literacy of adults was intended to be measured. France was initially among the participating countries, but shortly before the publication of the results of the survey, it decided to withdraw, and asked the OECD not to make French results public. This French request was based on the idea that the survey was biased in favour of an "Anglo-Saxon" approach. A certain number of items were seen by the French as culturally biased, as far as they were related to an Anglo-Saxon life context. As a matter of fact, the poor French performances in the OECD survey have multiple causes, among which the fact that most items were more oriented towards the measurement of life competencies rather than on academic performances has played a significant role. This leads to a general comment on French education: its curriculum is still predominantly characterized by the acquisition of academic knowledge, and has not introduced as much as other education systems the notion of life skills.

This specific character of the French education system has been clearly confirmed by the last PISA survey (Programme for International Student Assessment), in which French ranking was only close to the average, and not any longer within the first quartile. This disappointing ranking is not unrelated with the fact that PISA has largely introduced the notion of life competencies. In addition, the French curriculum is still largely based on disciplines. Very few trans-disciplinary learning sequences have been introduced in the curriculum. Furthermore, time spent studying basic topics (reading, writing, mathematics and sciences)

has been constantly reduced, while the curriculum has followed the opposite path: more is to be learned in a shorter school year.

- The introduction of new information and communication technologies in education.

Education and political authorities have made several attempts in the past 20 years for introducing New Information and Communication Technologies in the system. The majority of these initiatives can be qualified as top-down interventions, and teachers have shown some reluctance to invest significantly in these new approaches. On the whole, it is not possible to say that NICT have had a strong impact on the daily life of the majority of French schools. Very likely, more pupils are active in this domain at home than in their school. Good quality software is still rare, teacher training in the utilisation of NICT is inadequate and insufficient, lack of team work and trans-disciplinary learning activities among French teachers remain serious obstacles.

- Present status of equity from the point of view of the socio-economic background of pupils.

Access to education in France can not be described as discriminatory. Any child, whatever its gender, its ethnic origin, its socioeconomic status can have access to a public school, in principle the school which is assigned to its area of residence. Of course, although schools have an equal access to public means, they differ in terms of capacity to make pupils learning. Pupils' performances, all other things equal, differ with respect of the school where they learn. Research has shown that pupils' performances are not strongly associated with differences in terms of available public resources. They differ mostly for three reasons: a school effect, a social composition effect, and a teacher effect. The school effect can be linked to its culture, its ethos, its traditions, its status (public/private), its headmaster. The teacher effect seems quite significant. Some studies claim that about 30% of French teachers are performing rather poorly. Their status of civil servants is a strong obstacle for pushing low performing teachers outside the school system, and they tend to stay up to their retirement. Teachers are recruited through a system of competitive exam based on academic excellence, not on their teaching capacity.

The socio-economic composition of the intake has a significant role on pupil's performances. Schools that have the lowest performances are usually schools where the majority of pupils belong to families having a low socio-economic status, unemployed parents, immigrants, aso. There exists some positive discrimination in favour of schools located in areas where there is a concentration of low economic status households, which take the form of additional means and supplementary compensation for teachers, but such positive action seems to have little impact on pupil's performances.

As a matter of fact, the main problem faced by low performing schools is linked to the status of French teachers. These schools tend to have a higher concentration of inadequate teachers, namely the least experienced. Teachers assigned to difficult schools make all possible efforts to be transferred to a better school, and they tend to succeed after some years, when they begin to become experienced and more efficient. Difficult schools tend therefore to have a concentration of newly recruited teachers, and these teachers are not prepared to face the challenging context of a bad school.

- Integration of minorities and the new law concerning the secularisation of public schools

A significant proportion of poorly performing schools are located in suburbs of big cities where the proportion of inhabitants belonging to migrant minorities is important. These minorities, in the case of France, are primarily originating from northern Africa or sub-Saharan Africa, with a high proportion of Muslims. Many parents are not fluent in French, have a low level of education, and are not well integrated in the French society. They ignore education traditions and European codes, and are not in the position of providing to their children the same school support that middle class or upper class French families used to bring to their children. Last but not least, the neighbourhoods where these schools are located tend to have a relatively high level of violence, of uncivil behaviour, and of drug consumption or dealing practices. Schools are not exempted from this context, and it affects their daily operation and their ethos. Standard school values are simply ignored, hence the low school performances.

As said above, French public schools are supposed to be secular. In schools having a high proportion of Muslims, the number of girls dressed with a scarf, which used to be insignificant, has grown rapidly during the years 2000. This dress code has been perceived as an aggression to the secular principles by some teachers and headmasters, and an intense debate has spread all over France concerning the desirability of imposing a secular dress code for Muslim girls by law. Such a law has been adopted by the Parliament in 2004, forbidding all ostensible religious signs within public schools. The law is forbidding not only the Muslim scarf, but also the Jewish kippa, and the Christian Croce⁹. But clearly, the primary objective of the law was the Muslim scarf, which had become a more and more common practice in the recent years.

The causes of the increase are diverse: in some cases, girls are obliged to wear the scarf under the family pressure, while in other cases, they wear it voluntarily, to show a greater personal adhesion to Islamic values and faith. For the secularist point of view, the law is intended to protect girls against excessive family pressure, while from the point of view of Islamic lobbies, the law is a sign of greater intolerance against Islamism (the so called "Islam phobic" movement which has expanded in France during the recent period), in the context of the Al Qaida terrorist activities. Paradoxically, catholic schools are presently more open to the enrolment of Muslim girls wearing the scarf than secular public schools.

- The national debate on the expectations of the civil society vis-à-vis the school system

The issues of the objectives and of the supposedly declining quality of the French education system have intensified during the nineties and the 2000. After a period of expansion and mass secondary and tertiary education, which was expected to introduce a greater equity in the system, most observers think that the system has stopped to become more equitable a long time ago, and for the best school careers, the socio-economic origin of pupils and students plays a role which has not declined during the last decades. It is also claimed that the proportion of low achievers leaving the school system without any diploma is not any longer declining, and the majority of these low achievers belong to families having a poor socio-economic status.

⁹ The Christian Croce is allowed if its size is small enough (the size of a jewel pending on a neck chain).

Most ministers who have tried recently to introduce school reforms aimed at solving these issues have failed to do it. They have met the strong opposition of teachers unions, rather reluctant to accept any reform that could reduce their benefits, as they perceive them, or that could increase their professional burden. In most cases, teachers' protests against reforms have been supported by the public opinion. This is a feature of the French society, which is almost systematically on the side of those who oppose public action supposed to reduce acquired benefits.

In order to find a stronger legitimacy to public action, it was decided in 2003 to organise a ambitious public debate, each school being asked to organise public meetings involving teachers, pupils, parents, and all interested parties. A list of questions was suggested as possible items of discussions, and each meeting was supposed to produce a certain number of recommendations. About 15000 such meetings, having attracted about 1 million participants, have taken place between October and December 2003, and the recommendations have been synthesized by a group of about 30 education experts, and published in a report issued in March 2004¹⁰.

The major conclusions and recommendations brought by this debate are rather disappointing. It is claimed that the number of pupils leaving the education system without any diploma and a poor mastering of reading, about 15%, should be reduced to zero. In order to achieve this ambitious objective, pupils should be motivated properly, and work effectively. Violence in schools should be eradicated, and sanctions should be reintroduced. Parents ought to be more closely involved in the daily life of the school, and the average class size should be smaller.

One of the key questions rose before the debate, namely the option of giving up the system of a single track at the junior secondary level, (in order to create a specific track for low achievers), has produced ambiguous answers. As indicated earlier, in the seventies, the education minister Haby had introduced a reform called "the college unique", meaning that pupils for grades 6 to 9 were all supposed to attend the same type of class, with the same curriculum, and with the objective of providing the same set of basic knowledge to everybody. This reform had the advantage (on paper) of creating a real social heterogeneity within a given class, as well as a relative diversity in terms of academic ability. This reform has partially failed, as far as hidden practices, described earlier in this chapter, were intended to re-establish the former tracks, mostly to give high achievers the opportunity of attending high performing classes.

It is unclear whether the consultation leads to the conclusion that junior high school should have actual practices respecting the spirit of the law, namely children being randomly assigned to a given class, or whether different tracks should be open to different categories of pupils, namely a specific one for low achievers and a standard one for the others.

2) Tertiary education

- Problem of funding

French higher education is facing, since many years, a problem of under funding. The share of the GDP dedicated to the financing of higher education is 1.1%, of which 1% from public

¹⁰ Thélot, Claude, 2004 "Le miroir du débat" La Documentation Française, Paris 637 pp.

sources and 0.1% of private sources. Public funding is more or less equivalent to what is observed in most comparable countries. But for private funding, it is significantly lower. France has never had a tradition, like in the US or in Japan, of a strong private sector of higher education, nor a policy of charging fees in publicly funded universities. A growing number of European countries, which used to have a tradition similar to the French one (the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, etc.), have introduced some changes, or are in the process of introducing changes. In particular, fees paid by students for entering in public universities are increasing, and the total amount of resources allocated to tertiary education is also increasing. It is not the case of France, and as a consequence, expenditures per student are among the lowest in the developed world.

If one distinguishes between the two sectors which constitute French tertiary education, namely universities and Grandes Ecoles, it appears clearly a big difference in terms of resources per student. A Grandes Ecoles student costs from two to three times more than a university student. It is obvious that the under funding phenomenon applies only to universities. As a matter of fact, France is a unique example in which a university student is costing less than a secondary student.

- Problem of autonomy of universities

The management of universities, in spite of the reform introduced after the events of 1968 by the Faure law, is still strictly controlled by the Ministry of Education. The government is setting the rules for accrediting diplomas, which are “national” diplomas, and not “university” diplomas. The government is deciding alone what will be the number of new teaching or non teaching positions in each university, what is the budget allocated to each university and how many promotions for the faculty will be allocated every year. Most promotions are not decided at the university level, but at the national level, which creates a low incentive for faculty members for developing a sense of loyalty to their university.

The university budget is made of non salary expenditure, about 30% of the total costs, and it has to follow strict rules of management. The general accountant of the university is more inclined to follow the general regulations concerning disbursement procedures of public money than the willingness or the interest of the university management, because his responsibility works vis-à-vis the treasury authorities and not the university authorities. The rules are more conceived for avoiding mismanagement than for maximizing effectiveness. Most controls are done systematically ex ante, and not randomly ex post. As a consequence, the majority of administrative staff is involved in the execution of administrative tasks mostly thought for insuring that public regulations are fully respected, and not for insuring quality university services. Basically, the assumption is made that at all levels (the university authorities, the departments, the units, etc.), one is suspect of misuse of university resources.

This lack of flexibility is a strong obstacle for stimulating innovative approaches and for improving the effectiveness of the sector. The head of the university is elected by a coalition of corporatist interests, for a limited mandate of five years, not renewable. This function is not seen as an attractive reward by the most talented members of the university who could have developed a vision for the future of the institution. Quite the contrary, it is perceived as a carrot for those who fail to be recognized as promising academics.

In 2003, the Minister of Education had elaborated a project for extending the scope of autonomy of universities. This project was immediately opposed by activist student unions, under the arguments that it would open the door of universities to private interests, and that it would exacerbate competition between universities. The possible risks of this reform have not been confronted to its advantages in a national debate, and the government has immediately withdrawn the project because he has preferred to avoid student protests rather than give a chance to universities to improve themselves thanks to the right incentives. Street protests by students inaugurated in 1968 have left a deep feeling of uncontrolled succession of events which can be threatening for an elective democracy. As a consequence, French governments have a strong preference for delaying urgent reforms for universities in order to buy social peace.

- *The research policy*

In France, research is organised in a specific way (by international standards). University teaching staff is supposed to play an active role in both teaching and research. But there is a huge variability of involvement in research from one staff to another. It is left to the initiative of everyone, and as far as the regular funding for research is very limited, a large proportion of Faculty has too little incentives for engaging actively in research. As a matter of fact, the French tradition is based on the idea that research should be promoted under other types of institutions than universities. The bulk of academic research is carried out by specific institutions, among which one has the CNRS (National centre for scientific research), responsible for 40 fields of research; the Inserm, specialized in medical research, the Inra, specialized in agronomic research, the CEA, specialised in atomic energy research, the CNES, specialized in space research, and some others. These research institutions are independent from universities, although they have de facto cooperated in many instances. But the dichotomy leads to different evaluation procedures, different careers for the staff, and therefore different incentives.

A significant proportion of research institutes have no direct relations with a university, and therefore, researchers are not directly involved in teaching and training of future researchers. These institutions can not rely on PhD students for providing new blood in the system. Researchers are civil servants, which mean a life job even if they are unproductive. Those who have closer relations with universities are hardly under the authority of the university, and they remain supervised and managed by their central headquarter in Paris. The expected synergy between independent research organisations and universities is not as developed as it could be for maximizing the quality of research outcomes, and from this point of view, France can be seen at a disadvantage with comparable countries.

A large proportion of those who are concerned by the management of the sector are quite aware of these drawbacks, but it is extremely difficult to introduce the desirable changes. The system is extremely rigid, and the majority of unions in the sector are opposed to any major change. For instance, the civil servant status given to researchers is obviously a handicap for an adequate management of human resources in the sector. Before recruiting a new researcher for life, it is difficult to be certain that he will be good enough for such a long period. But of course, it is a protection that is actively upheld by the unions. In addition, the salaries of civil servants tend to be lower than those of researchers who have a different status, and the system fails to attract the most promising researchers.

- *The Bologna process*

The French system is often seen as excessively complex, and as having not enough visibility and transparency from an international perspective. Its specific features are not perfectly understood by the rest of the world, and the consequence of this lack of visibility is a lower than expected attractivity for potentially promising candidates from abroad, both as students or as teachers/researchers. A recent minister of education, mister Allègre, has been actively lobbying for changing the architecture of the French tertiary education system. One of the causes of this complexity is the excessive number of diploma categories: there are diplomas after two years of tertiary education (called Diploma of technical university education) , after 3 years (called Licence), after 4 years, (called Maîtrise), after 5 years (there are three categories at this level, namely (i) the DEA (Diploma for advanced studies, which is opening the door to the PhD), second (ii) the DESS (Diploma of Specialized Studies, which has a vocational orientation), and third (iii) the Diploma for Engineering Studies, which is delivered by the Grandes Ecoles. And finally, there is the Doctorate, after 8 years and plus of tertiary education.

The proposed new architecture is often referred to as the LMD or +3, +5, and +8 structure. LMD stands for the initials of the three diplomas delivered respectively after 3, 5, and 8 years of tertiary education (respectively Licence, Master, and Doctorate). This new architecture has been adopted by a certain number of European ministers of education in May 1998 in Bologna, hence the name of the process.

For France, the new and simplified system has some reform implications: the major change is for the second diploma, the master. It is supposed to replace, within universities, both the DEA and the DESS, and to last two years instead of one. Before the LMD structure, the fifth year of education was selective, but not the fourth year. Selective means that in order to enter a next step on the diploma ladder, there are two filters, the first one being the possession of the previous diploma in the ladder, and the second one being a numerous clausus applied to those having the previous diploma. For instance, if there are 50 applications of Licence holders for a given DEA, and if only 30 seats are available, 30 of the 50 will be selected. This selection will take place after 3 years of tertiary education, and not after 4 years as in the previous system.

The second change is again for the master. In the past, the DEA and the DESS were highly different, the DEA being more research oriented, and the DESS being more vocational oriented. The new master will make these two options closer, and students will have more freedom in the selection of optional courses they can take. It is expected that some of the best students who were previously inclined to prefer the DESS for its better job opportunities, will be more open to accept an exposure to research activities, and may continue as PhD students after the master.

The Bologna process will have a third implication on the French system, namely a new way for obtaining a degree. Most French universities are still relying on yearly exams for being promoted to the next year of study. With the Bologna approach, French universities are invited to adopt the ECTS graduation system (European Credit Transfer System). The ECTS is based on the accumulation of “credits”, and to get the first degree (Licence), one needs to accumulate 180 credits, while for a master, 120 credits are required (60 per year on average). The ECTS is expected to facilitate mobility of students in at least two different European countries, and the credits delivered in any university are accepted by partner universities in countries who participate in the Bologna process.

Unfortunately, the reform does not address specifically the issue of the merging of Universities with the Grandes Ecoles, a highly desirable but extremely difficult reform to undertake. The Grandes Ecoles used to attract the best students of each generation, and universities are condemned to accept the second best students. Therefore, doctorate students do not belong to the most able group, which is a serious drawback of the French system.

- Why French universities are ranking poorly in international comparisons?

This drawback is well illustrated by the situation of French universities in international leagues. A recent study carried out by the University Jiao Tong of Shanghai has attempted to rank the first 500 hundred best universities worldwide¹¹. There are only two French universities in the first series of 100, namely Paris 6 which is ranked 65th and Paris 11 which is ranked 72nd. Before the first French university, one has 42 universities located in the United States, 5 in the United Kingdom, 5 in Japan, 3 in Germany, 2 in Canada, Switzerland and Sweden, and one in the Netherlands, Australia and Norway. This ranking is disappointing for France, because several smaller countries have a better position. However, such a ranking is not a good mirror of the French higher education as a whole, as far as the production of knowledge by France is more important than that of most of the small countries with a better ranking. It is due to the fact that France university system is not organised for having high performing champions. It has a decent average type of institutions (most French universities are more or less equally treated), but these institutions can not really compete with the elite institutions of the rest of the world.

Elite institutions ranked among the best 50 or even among the best 100 have in common 6 characteristics: they can select the best students of the country; they can hire the best teachers, and very often can pay them a salary above the average; they have consequently a budget per student higher than the average; they also have a more developed research sector, with up to date equipment, numerous research contracts and close links with the private sector; they are multidisciplinary institutions, with at least departments in both humanities and sciences; and finally, they have a critical size of at least 10000 students and 1000 faculty members, and more frequently a size of 15000 to 30000 students and 1500 to 3000 staff.

French universities have the critical size, sometimes they are multidisciplinary, but they have not the best students. In addition, they can not offer better salaries to the best performing teachers, and their regular budget is much lower than those of the best universities in the world. On the other hand, the Grandes Ecoles have the most able students, an adequate budget per student, but they have not the critical size. In addition they are specialized in a narrow professional field, and research is rarely well developed, because graduate students have access to the best jobs on the labour market. As a consequence, the economic return of preparing a PhD is very low, maybe negative. It is obvious that in order to compete with the best institutions in the world, France has no other choice than to merge the components of the best Grande Ecoles with those of the best universities, and to develop along these lines a sector in which excellence can emerge.

Several reports have recently been published, attempting to propose scenarios aimed at improving the performances of the French higher education system. The majority does not address the issue of merging the characteristics doomed to produce the right combination of

¹¹ <http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/rank/methodology.htm>

factors leading to excellence. Such a policy would create a strong opposition from the Grandes Ecoles, which tend to like their present status, as well as that of universities, which hate the idea that some of them would be better than the others, and have access to more resources. The egalitarian tradition of the French education system does not accept easily this kind of differentiation.

The egalitarian tradition is nevertheless deeply challenged by the present system. Obviously, it is more rewarding for students to enter the Grandes Ecoles than the universities. They will benefit a more attractive learning environment while they are studying, and enjoy a lower likelihood of unemployment, as well as a higher salary during their working life. They will be part of the elite without any doubt. In addition, the cost of these advantages is mostly borne by taxpayer money, not by themselves. This free access to such a future could perfectly benefit the students whose parents have a low socio-economic status. Actually, it is not the case. The majority of students who have access to the Grandes Ecoles are from the richest socio-economic groups, and the majority of students with a low socio-economic status are entering the universities. So the French system does not buy more equality at the expense of excellence. It has a bad record on both domains, a lower than expected efficiency, and a lower than expected equality of outcomes.

Conclusion

The development of the French education system during the past two centuries has been driven by two major concerns, excellence and equality of opportunities. These two concerns are sometimes perfectly compatible, but they may also conflict under certain circumstances. During the recent period, the performances of the system tend to deteriorate when comparisons are made with the situation of a certain number of highly developed countries. Present performances tend to rank France towards the average, and not any longer towards the top league. Two factors are behind this evolution: the balance between excellence and equality has shifted excessively in favour of the egalitarian objective and the capacity of the French system to make reforms for reaching a better balance for excellence is weak, as is weak the overall capacity of the French society to carry out reforms. A fierce debate is going on for elaborating a new education policy, and the outcome of the debate is still unclear. Nobody can predict with certainty when the deterioration of the system will create the conditions for setting up a new policy explicitly driven by the objectives of efficiency and excellence.

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