# Chapter 3
# The Question of School Dropout: A French Perspective

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## Introduction

At the start of the 1980s, with unemployment rates continuing to rise, the French government targeted the particular difficulties faced by young people who were entering the workforce without qualifications.[1] The Minister for Education called for higher qualification levels from the French population, and this objective was later made official in the law relating to education and careers guidance of 1989. This projected a development over the next decade in which the whole of the age-group would attain a recognised qualification of at least the level of basic vocational awards – the Certificate of Vocational Aptitude (CAP) or the Certificate of Vocational Studies (BEP).[2] This law would contribute to the issue of school dropout coming fully onto the political agenda at the beginning of the 1990s.

The government-led effort to increase qualification rates was reinforced in the course of the next decade by European Union directives. At the time of the Lisbon Summit in 2000, the member states of the Union emphasised the need to train a skilled workforce. Given that it was the least well-qualified individuals who were also the most affected by unemployment, the priority became one of reducing early school leaving. Today, the objective is to ensure that by 2010 at least 80% of young people aged 20–24 years have an upper secondary qualification.

In France, the growing government concern about early school leavers, along with the development of research in the area, has resulted in a fuller understanding of a phenomenon whose contours can be described as fluid. To understand the specific features of the French context, the discussion begins with a sketch of the organisation of the education system. Following that, there is an overview of how

*(translated by Richard Teese)

[1]In 1985, the unemployment rate in France for young people aged 15–24 years was 23.7%. It was 19.7% in 2007.

[2]CAP and BEP are awards granted at the end of 2 years of vocational study in school.

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much is known about the issue of dropout. Finally the discussion turns to public policies aimed at tackling the issue.

## The French Context of Schooling: A Centralised System, Strongly Hierarchical and Recently Transformed to a Mass System

The French school system is entirely centralised. The powers delegated to regional and local authorities – *région*, *département*, and local councils – mainly relate to the management of buildings and equipment. The French state takes charge of the broader directions of educational policy, including curriculum, timetable and school year, examinations, and recruitment and management of staff. Centralised, the French schooling system is also equally very hierarchical. It is true that the creation of a common junior high school (*collège unique*) in 1975 displayed a will to offer comprehensive schooling to the whole of an age cohort. However, from the end of junior high school, the system becomes complex and breaks into numerous streams which are markedly hierarchical. Thus, only the 'better' student reaches academic senior high school (*lycée général*).

### *Lower Secondary Education: Junior High School (Collège)*

In 1975, the reforms led by the Minister of National Education, René Haby, ended the streamed programs of lower secondary education and created the common junior high school (*collège unique*). The guiding concern was to avoid early selection of pupils (separation into different streams), and through this approach to raise general levels of achievement.

Junior high school is organised into four year-levels, starting with the class of 'the sixth' and ending with the class of 'the third'. All pupils are expected to follow the same educational program over these 4 years across a range of subject areas: French, mathematics, history, geography and physical sciences. In contrast to primary schools, where class teachers usually teach all subjects, in junior high school teachers usually teach one or two subjects to different classes.

Today, almost all children continue their studies until the end of the fourth year of junior high school: the continuation rate in 2001 was 97%. However, junior high school is not as 'common' as it might appear. Of pupils entering the fourth and final year in 2001, 85% came from the mainstream general program, while 15% had been guided into special streams. Since 1996, junior high schools have been able to make specific arrangements for students in difficulty, covering both programs and timetables (Ministry of Education Nationale, 2008). These arrangements differ according to year-level. In the penultimate year, 'support classes' are run to help students reintegrate into the mainstream program. Teaching is organised around 'projects' within defined subject areas, but linked with the world of work through short placements.

In the final year of junior high school, 'transition classes' are more directly geared to vocational training, with work placements taking up half of the student's total time.

Pupils who have experienced the greatest difficulties in primary school are oriented from the start of junior high school to pre-vocational classes (*classes préparatoires à l'apprentissage* [CPA], and *classes d'initiation préprofessionnelle par alternance* [CLIPA]) or to adaptation classes (*section d'enseignement général et professionnel adapté* [SEGPA]). Pre-vocational classes are located in apprenticeship centres and concern only a small minority of students (9,700 in 2007–08). The SEGPA stream enables children judged to be 'poorly adjusted' to school to continue their schooling until age 16. There were more than 100,000 pupils in SEGPA classes in 2006, 70% of whose parents were in blue-collar jobs, were unemployed or were not in the labour force, and 61% of whom were boys. Each class comprises about 16 pupils, and this enables individualised study programs to be developed. Pupils follow a general program of the type that mainstream pupils in the first and second year of junior high school follow, with the difference being in how SEGPA pupils are managed, that is, smaller classes, an individualised learning program, and a combination of general and vocational studies. From the third year of the program, the emphasis falls more on vocational training.

At the end of junior high school, and regardless of stream, all pupils sit their *brevet* (or school certificate) examination. Results are based on written tests and also continuous assessment in French, mathematics and history-geography. The national success rate in 2008 was 81.7%. Almost all of each new cohort now gains this award: in 2007, only 3.2% of 15- to 19-year-olds did not hold it, while amongst people over 65 years of age, the rate is 64.6%.

But behind these aggregate figures important differences are found. In fact, junior high school is far from being 'comprehensive', even within the 'general' stream. For a start, there are quite sharp differences between schools themselves, linked to their location. Numerous studies, spanning urban sociology and the sociology of education, have demonstrated the magnitude of inequalities between schools in different locations in terms of social composition, teaching conditions, and rates of success. For example, in the city of Paris, the rate of success in attaining the school leaving certificate (*brevet*) varies from 44% to 100%, depending on the school.

## *General and Technological Education*

While earlier stages of schooling are marked by a policy of wide pupil mix and common core of curricular subjects, senior high school divides into distinct programs through choice of educational routes. Thus, at the end of the last year of junior high school, pupils are guided through a counselling process into either a general or technological senior high school or a vocational senior high school. Among students enrolled in the final year of junior high school in 2006, 57% entered the general and technological stream in senior high school in 2007, and 27% took the vocational route. A further 6% were repeating the year, while 10% did not continue in education (at least in schools or training under the control of the

Ministry of Education). This figure includes both dropouts and young people entering education or training programs under the control of other Ministries, including work-study or work-training programs.

The program in general and technological high schools lasts for 3 years ('second form', 'first form', and 'final year'). During the first year, pupils follow a common program of study. At the same time, they are expected to choose two components which are 'determinative' in their later allocation to specialised streams, based on options. At the end of the first year of senior high school, pupils are separated between the 'general' stream and the 'technological' stream. Orientation towards stream is often based on results in the first year of the high school course, with more successful pupils entering the general stream. This route, which recruits about 60% of students completing the first year of senior high, is designed to prepare for extended study. It comprises three series: economics and social science (ES), humanities/arts (L), and science (S). Depending on the series, the course of study will differ.

The 'technological' stream includes both 'general' subjects (French, mathematics, history-geography, science, English) and 'technological' studies which comprise vocational studies, like accounting. There are many areas of specialisation in the technological stream, the most important of which are laboratory technology, industrial technology, management, health and social welfare. When students complete the third and final year of senior high school, they sit for the national *baccalaureat* examination which opens the way to higher education.

## *Vocational Training: Institutional Duality*

### Vocational Senior High School and Apprenticeship Centres

Vocational training currently enrols about 40% of young people who complete junior high school. Courses lead to the award of various qualifications – BEP, CAP, vocational baccalaureat. These programs prepare young people for employment or, in some cases, tertiary education. They mostly enrol students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds: in 2007–08, those from a low SES background accounted for 63% of students studying for a CAP, 54.2% of those studying for a BEP and 51.4% studying for a vocational baccalaureat. While the general and technological streams of the baccalaureat are frequently offered in the same school, vocational courses are delivered in two different institutions: either vocational high schools or apprenticeship centres.

In vocational senior high schools, pupils have the status of a tertiary education student (*statut d'étudiant*) and, in addition to campus-based studies, undertake a work placement. But in CFA (apprenticeship centres), they work under contract with a business and are paid wages. They do both theoretical and practical studies in the apprenticeship centres for about one week in every four. For the most part, apprentices are young people judged to have failed at school. One in three has been excluded from mainstream programs from the end of the second year of junior high school.

## *Qualifications*

Young people in vocational training can work towards the award of a BEP, CAP, or a vocational baccalaureat. The CAP and the BEP give the same level of qualification, while the vocational baccalaureat gives selective access to higher education.

The CAP (*certificat d'aptitude professionnelle*) takes 2 years, and is offered in more than 200 specialities. The program includes general studies (French, history, mathematics) as well as vocational training. CAP courses also include work placements, which vary according to specialisation. Numbers in CAP programs have been declining over the long term – 264,000 enrolments in 1980–81 compared to only 110,000 in 2007–08. Fifty-two per cent of CAP students are females. Today, a majority of CAP students undertake their training in an apprenticeship centre – 74,000 compared to 46,000 in vocational senior high school.

The BEP (*brevet d'études professionnelles*) aims to be more general than the CAP. There are some 50 specialities, with courses generally running for 2 years. Where with a CAP, the choice of training is fairly specific – 'butcher', 'fishmonger', 'small meats butcher', etc. – BEP courses relate to a family of occupations or an industry area, such as the 'food industry'. In 2007–08, 403,459 students were preparing a BEP, of whom 44.3% were female.

CAP graduates usually enter the workforce, while a majority of BEP graduates undertake either a technological or a vocational baccalaureat. In 2007–08, of the total number of pupils enrolled in the second year of CAP, 5.6% had repeated a grade, 11.7% were streamed into BEP, 10.7 % had chosen to enrol in a vocational baccalaureat, and 65% had left the education system (information not available on the remaining 7%).

Regarding BEP pupils, 8.3% repeated a grade, 42.5% were streamed into a vocational baccalaureat, 10.9% took a technological baccalaureat over 2 years (the first of which is an 'adaptation' year), and 35% had left the education system.

The vocational baccalaureat was created in 1985 in a context when BEP and CAP courses appeared inadequate, especially in industry areas such as information technology (IT) or communications. The idea was to allow students with a CAP or a BEP to prepare for this exam in 2 years. Incorporating a minimum of 16 weeks work placement, the vocational baccalaureat was conceived of as a qualification giving direct access to the labour market; however, nearly a third of graduates enter tertiary education courses.

Since 2007, it has been possible to study for the vocational baccalaureat over 3 years. From 2010, this approach will be generalised and will bring to an end the total training period of 4 years (CAP/BEP plus vocational baccalaureat). According to the Minister of National Education, Xavier Darcos:

> The baccalaureat in 3 years should change outlooks on vocational courses by ensuring that there is 'parity of esteem' between general baccalaureats and vocational. The objective is also to help more young people reach baccalaureat level. For while 6 months after completing a vocational baccalaureat 60% of young people have a job, less than 50% of BEP graduates do.

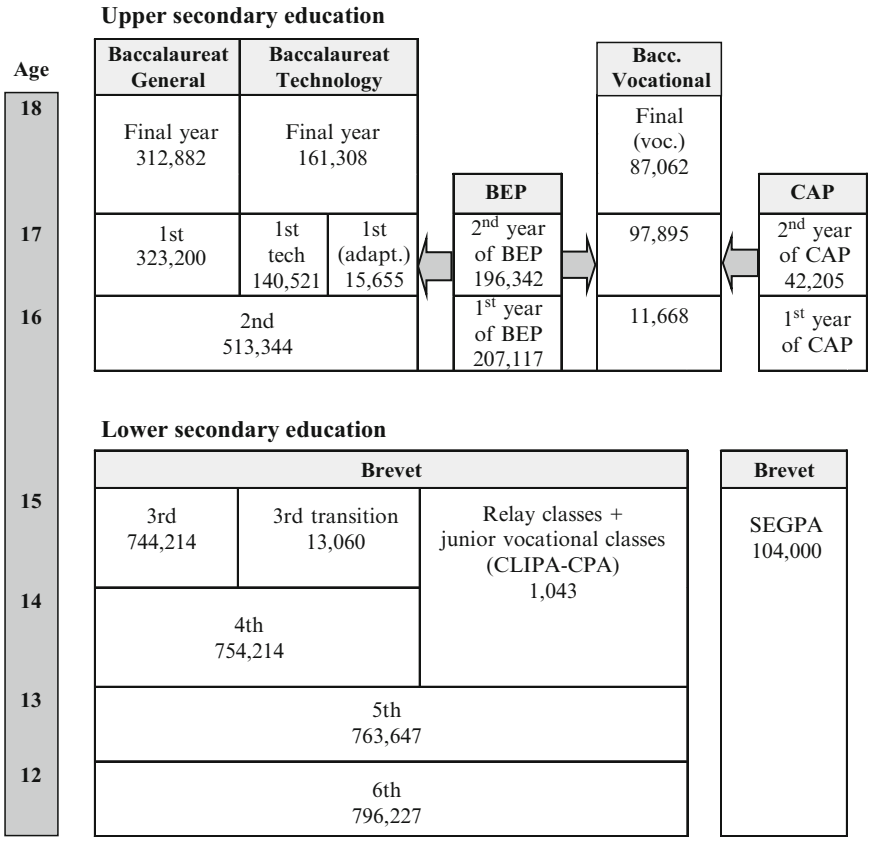


**Fig. 3.1** Numbers of students in secondary education in France in 2007–08, by major stream or section

The structure of secondary education in France, with student numbers to show the relative importance of each of the different types of upper secondary qualifications, is provided in Fig. 3.1.

## Graduation Rates: Trends Over Time

### *Democratisation: Qualitative or Quantitative?*

Appearing on the agenda during the 19th century, the theme of 'democratisation' of education has remained very much to the fore in France. It has been linked with republican meritocratic ideology, according to which individuals should no longer inherit, but should earn their social position. Since the Ferry laws which

established free, compulsory and secular schooling in the early 1880s, the objective of reformers has been not only to raise rates of participation in school as well as length of schooling, but also to ensure that educational success is more equally experienced. The historian Antoine Prost (1997) describes this kind of democratisation as 'qualititative' to the extent that it involves a weakening of the link between social origin and eventual social position. He contrasts this with quantitative democratisation – or 'massification' – which describes an increase in numbers of pupils, but without social inequalities disappearing. The latter are simply displaced into other forms.

What kind of democratisation has occurred in France? From a purely quantitative perspective, the chances of access to secondary education have undoubtedly increased. Following government policy to raise general levels of education, the decade of 1985–95 saw an unprecedented rise in senior high school numbers and in graduations from senior high school (see Fig. 3.2). The proportion of a generation holding a general, technological or vocational baccalaureat rose from 5% in 1950 to 29.4% in 1985, and to 62.7% in 1995. It stood at 64.2% in 2007. It should be stressed that this increase is due in large measure to the creation and expansion of the technological baccalaureat (1965) and vocational baccalaureat (1985).

Nevertheless, if qualification rates in the population have continued to grow, social inequalities in access to different levels of schooling and different streams have continued. Expansion in high school graduations has not been uniformly experienced across all social ranks. Amongst graduates in the general (or academic) streams of the baccalaureat, more than a third are from a senior management or liberal professions background, a category representing only about 8.4% of the

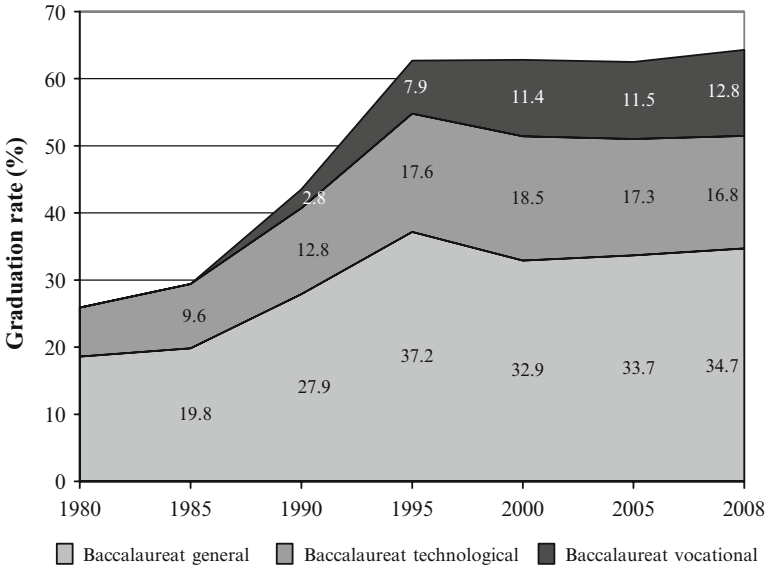


**Fig. 3.2** Evolution of graduation rates, by type of baccalaureat: 1980–2008

French workforce. On the other hand, every fourth graduate in the vocational stream is from a manual worker's home, and only eight in 100 are from a high SES family.

Similarly, geographical inequalities persist both across France and within particular localities and regions. For example, within the academic region of the city of Lille, the proportion of young people holding the baccalaureat is 60% compared to 80% in Paris. And within the greater region of Paris, success at the baccalaureat exams varies widely according to school. In 2005, 100% of candidates in the prestigious and selective establishments of the inner city and rich suburbs succeeded, as opposed to fewer than 50% in some senior high schools located in areas with the most disadvantaged populations.

### *An Increasingly Qualified Population*

In 1985, nearly one in ten 16-year-olds discontinued studies, with the majority of these leaving school without any qualification. In 1989, the Orientation and Guidance law laid down an objective of 80% of a generation reaching baccalaureat level, announcing, in effect, that the whole of an age cohort should attain a level of schooling at least equivalent to a CAP or BEP. It was an ambitious goal to take all young people beyond compulsory schooling and to ensure that the whole of the population should hold a qualification of recognised value in the labour market.

In France, the proportion of young people who quit school or other education without a qualification has remained at about 18% for some time. These are young people who have not graduated from upper secondary education, and they have no baccalaureat, CAP or BEP. Between 1982 and 2007, amongst young people from working class backgrounds, the rate has fallen from 53% to 32%, but remains very much higher than for the children of professionals and senior managers (5% in 2007) or office-workers (18.7%).

An ongoing high proportion of dropout has contributed to an ever-growing interest on the part of government and of social scientists. What then, is the state of our knowledge of this phenomenon?

## School Dropout in France: An Overview of What We Know

### *School Dropout Meaning What?*

'School dropout' (*décrochage scolaire*), 'disconnection from school' (*déscolarisation*), 'early leaving' (*abandon scolaire*), 'leaving school without a qualification' (*arrêt d'études sans qualification*) – there exists no single term in French corresponding to the term, school dropout. A range of terms is used by researchers and

observers in the education system, testifying to the relatively recent nature of policy and scholarly interest in this question in France. Indeed, attention was for a long time centred on the question of 'scholastic failure' and on democratisation and equality of opportunity. But vagueness in language can equally be read as vagueness in the nature of the phenomenon itself. Strictly speaking, early termination of studies could be defined as leaving the school system before the statutory age of 16. However, this concerns only a very small group, kept small by the high rate of grade-repeating and a set of institutional processes discussed later in this chapter.

The level of education and training in France has traditionally been assessed using measures established in 1969. These define early leavers as young people who have quit education without reaching the final year of the CAP or BEP, or the first year of the general or technological baccalaureat (Léger, 2008). In France, the size of this group has fallen from 25% of a generation (or 170,000 young people) in 1975, to only 6%, or 42,000 young people, in 2005.

However, the statistical concept of early leaving as 'not reaching a defined stage of schooling' has progressively been abandoned in favour of the concept of 'not completing qualifications'. The Lisbon protocol, to which France is a signatory, views the issue as one of completing upper secondary education, obtaining a diploma and accessing employment. What matters from this perspective is failure to complete a program – cessation of studies before obtaining an award (CAP, BEP, baccalauréat). Since 2000, completion of an upper secondary program has been considered as the minimum necessary level of qualification. Applied to France in 2005 to 2007, the numbers failing this test would represent about 134,000 young people, or 18% of the relevant school population.

Thus, there are in France two different statistical concepts in circulation: an older approach in which the highest stage of schooling attempted is the issue, and a newer approach in which a minimum level of qualification is the criterion.

## *Fluidity in the Measure, and Measurement of Flows*

As well as definitional problems, it should be stressed that estimating the number of pupils who fail to reach a certain stage of schooling or who fail to complete a qualification is far from an exact science. There does not exist in France any definition which is common to different administrative departments, and definitions can also vary from one academic region to another. It is thus difficult to do a precise stocktake at a local level, given that numbers can vary simply as a function of the particular organisation processing them. A report by the general inspectorate of national education stresses, indeed, that figures given for the same region can vary from 8% to 25% (Dubreuil et al., 2005).

Despite the vagueness which surrounds the concept of dropout and the difficulties of measurement, it is possible to establish a number of tendencies at a national level.

## *Who Are the Dropouts? A Statistical Profile*

Most statistical series highlight the fact that dropout is a big issue. Far from being a marginal tendency, they show that growing official concern with school dropout is fully justified by its magnitude. Secondly, dropout involves pupils from as young as 14- to 15-years-old, and the level rises with age. Finally, all studies of the phenomenon have demonstrated the over-representation of pupils from working-class backgrounds.

All the data show a general tendency for 'exits without qualifications' to decline. But at the same time, they reveal a maintenance of social inequalities. Moreover, they testify to the importance of a pupil's 'school career' – for grade repeating prior to entry to secondary school plays a big role.

Logistic regression enables us to demonstrate the relative weight of different factors, and notably the importance of curriculum stream, in explaining school dropout. The analysis is based on the 'cohort of 1995' panel study conducted by the *Direction de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la performance, Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale*.

The two senior high school streams of the general and the technological baccalaureat are clearly distinguished from the others by the low probability of dropout. The difference could perhaps be explained by the general, as compared to the vocational, nature of a baccalaureat stream, but hinges more on the social prestige hierarchy of the different streams which is implicit, but widely understood. The more that a stream is considered as prestigious, the weaker the likelihood of abandoning it. The importance of stream points to the fundamental role played by school guidance.

As Table 3.1 suggests, school career plays an important role in what happens to a young person since, all other factors remaining equal, repeating a grade in primary school makes dropping out likely (66.6% of those repeating a grade drop out). This confirms the results of numerous qualitative studies (as cited above) which show that early learning difficulties lead eventually to dropping out.

There is a slight tendency for boys to quit school more often than girls. But family background factors play a much bigger role than gender. The chances of dropout weaken as parental level of education rises. This is consistent with analyses inspired by Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, or more specifically with studies based on interviews or small-scale surveys which show that poorly-educated parents experience more difficulties helping their children with the demands of school or assisting them to construct an academic or vocational plan (Terrail & Bedi, 2002).

At a given level of parental education, children whose fathers are in intermediate professional jobs have a lower chance of dropping out than those from a skilled manual worker's background; while the children of semi-skilled manual workers and even more those where the fathers have never worked or where job is not reported have a higher chance of dropping out. There are several possible explanations which are relevant here. When parents have a stable job which permits them to live comfortably, the family environment is in itself more stable for the child and

**Table 3.1** Determinants of school dropout

| Categories | Per cent (%) | Estimate |
|---|---|---|
| (Intercept) | 35.3 | 0.12* |
| **Gender** | | |
| Boy | 40.4 | Reference |
| Girl | 29.9 | –0.14*** |
| **Stream** | | |
| Senior high (general) | 4.8 | –3.02*** |
| Senior high (tech) | 10.9 | –2.69*** |
| BEP | 58.0 | Reference |
| CAP | 69.2 | 0.40*** |
| Never enrolled in above | 74.4 | 0.65*** |
| **Father's occupation** | | |
| Manager, professional | 16.2 | –0.08 |
| Associate professional | 23.2 | –0.18*** |
| Small business, indep. | 36.0 | 0.09 |
| Office worker | 35.1 | –0.05 |
| Skilled manual | 43.0 | Reference |
| Semi-skilled manual | 53.1 | 0.16** |
| Unknown/never worked | 55.1 | 0.27*** |
| **Parents' highest level of qualification** | | |
| Higher education | 13.0 | –0.25*** |
| Baccalaureat or equivalent | 22.6 | –0.14* |
| BEP | 31.5 | –0.13* |
| CAP | 40.7 | Reference |
| Leaving certificate (brevet) | 44.1 | 0.07 |
| No qualification | 55.2 | 0.29*** |
| No response | 52.2 | 0.36*** |
| **Type of municipality of junior high school attended** | | |
| Paris region | 35.3 | 0.22*** |
| Over 100,000 inhabitants | 34.1 | 0.11* |
| 20,000 up to 100,000 | 34.3 | Reference |
| 5,000 up to 20,000 | 37.0 | 0.00 |
| Less than 5,000 inhabitants | 36.7 | 0.03 |
| **Repeated a grade in primary school** | | |
| No | 30.7 | Reference |
| Yes | 66.6 | 0.57*** |

Notes: *, **, *** = 10%, 5% and 1% thresholds.

the parents offer a role model of success, giving meaning to achievement at school. Moreover, parents try to prevent any social demotion of their children and are thus so much more conscious of the problems of incomplete schooling (*déscolarisation*) which risks the future social position of their children.

Finally, it is important to note the higher probability of dropping out associated with attending a junior high school in the Paris region by comparison with going to an establishment located in a municipality of between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. This highlights the importance of the geographical context of schooling.

## *Analyses of the Dropout Phenomenon in French Sociology*

Studies of school dropout have multiplied in France in the course of the 1990s, notably under the influence of several Ministries which launched a very large research project on the question in 1999. Most research has been conducted from a qualitative view.

Moreover, in the last few years most French researchers have studied dropping out of school as a 'combinatory process' (Millet & Thin, 2003), with research based on a reconstruction of schooling histories. Starting from the premise that 'the comprehension of the processes of dropping out cannot be reduced to the search for determinant factors', the task has been to show how family life, school life and peer culture interact.

A distinctively sociological approach to the process of dropping out takes differences of situation as a key element. The sociologist adopts a critical view of the concept of dropout itself, instead of merely inheriting it from institutional authority. As Stephane Bonnéry (2004) shows, 'the emergence of the category of dropout used by schools to depict the problems it faces runs the risk of homogenising under a single de-sociological term the different processes which lead pupils to cease attending school or at least to show no interest in schooling'.

Bonnéry rejects, moreover, a fatalistic vision which presupposes a link between 'pupil origin' and academic future. To him, if school dropout is more frequent amongst working classes, this is a question in the first place of achievement problems. Thus, the task is to understand why it is that pupils struggle to learn.

## *Conceptualising Dropping Out as a Process*

Research by Glasman (2000) questions the assumed 'specificity' of school dropouts.

In terms of objective and quantifiable attributes, there does not appear to be any radical difference between senior high school students who drop out and those who, poorly motivated by school work as they may be, remain on the inside of school. Given this, the task should be to study how the objectives of dropouts differ from students who continue – the particular processes which distinguish trajectories – rather than looking at how pupils themselves might differ.

Taking dropout as the outcome of a cumulative process of difficulties, Broccolichi's originality lies in having looked at the antecedents of dropping out (2000). Focusing on the relationship between the dropout and school knowledge, Broccolichi has demonstrated the central role of 'cognitive disengagement' (*décrochage cognitif*). This concerns an often 'silent' phenomenon, not marked by displays of indiscipline, violence, or absenteeism. Pupils do not reach the point of entry to their 'craft' as 'students', the demands of which are not clear to them, and they lose perspective on the meaning of school work, thus breaking with the expectations of the system even while remaining 'on the inside' of school.

### *The Role of the Institution*

Not focused simply on pathways of young people, most French researchers insist on the fact that dropping out calls into question how well schooling works as an institution, and particularly its capacity to give positive meaning to the experience of school and to help guide young people within it.

Reaching junior high school often marks a turning point in the trajectory of dropouts. Learning difficulties and a feeling of demoralisation tend to increase once children enter this new institution where demands on students increase and the experience of deepening failure is no longer offset by a personal link with the teacher (Broccolichi & Ben Ayed, 1999). On the basis of the personal accounts they reviewed, Broccolichi and Ben Ayed observe that 'this type of situation leads logically to indiscipline in classes where the possibilities exist for connivance in it on the part of other pupils, similarly motivated'.

Besides changes linked to conditions under which learning occurs, junior high school as an institution also plays a role in how pupils perceive and respond to schooling, in that school can oppose the pathways that pupils might wish to take, notably at the end of the second last year. Indeed, a decision on stream that is imposed and not wanted by either parent or pupil contributes to a loss of meaning and can encourage a progressive disengagement from school.

## Public Policies and Programs Put in Place to Reduce Dropout

For many years in France, dropout was considered to be a marginal problem, limited to particular populations, such as gypsies or recent arrivals. In fact, it is only from around the second half of the 1990s that it is possible to really speak of an institutional concern for young people with 'incomplete schooling' (*élèves déscolarisés*), a concern that was matched by the implementation of specific educational interventions. That school dropout could occur before that time without becoming an issue recognised by educational institutions or by researchers is linked to a convergence of factors (Glasman, 2000): 'Giving up school had less visibility as long as the labour market could absorb unskilled labour' and school was thus not seen as necessary for workforce transition. Moreover the institutional priority was on 'democratisation' of school, particularly access to senior high school: the issue was above all how to raise the general level of school qualifications in order to meet the needs of the economy.

In fact, most of the education policies implemented since the 1960s (at both system and school level) have been aimed at lifting the general level of qualification of the population, checking failure of school, and promoting equal opportunity. The emergence of dropout as a 'policy problem' seems to have favoured the development of intervention measures at an individual level.

## *System Level*

At the system level, major structural changes mark the history of French schooling and its much greater democratisation since the 1960s. From the outset, these changes involved transforming the mixed types of lower secondary education into a new type of school: the *collège* (junior high school). Between 1966 and 1975, some 2,354 junior high schools were built to accommodate pupils from the formerly diverse range of school types that once represented lower secondary education. From the 1980s, the concern shifted to promoting the greatest access to senior high school and the baccalaureat. Between 1982 and 1992, the rate of access to the final year of the baccalaureat rose from 35.7% to 66%. In 1993, the different streams of senior high school were reorganised with a view to 'parity of esteem' for all specialisations and to put an end to the supremacy of mathematics. This involved allowing greater individual support and supervision for the weakest learners, and the establishment of supplementary classes for small groups. As it has turned out, this reform has had few positive effects, and since 1995 there has been stagnation in the number of senior high school graduates as well as a maintenance of the hierarchy of difficult streams.

## *School Level*

At the start of the 1980s, French education policy took an important turn. While, since the 1960s, the idea had been to create a uniform system to offer the same programs to all students, the 1980s saw a switch to give 'more to those who have less', with the implementation in 1981 of Education Priority Zones or EPZ.

Born of the 'observation that educational inequalities are due to the great diversity of social and cultural settings', Educational Priority Zones involve designating selected schools (both senior high and junior high) to receive supplementary funding.

The effectiveness of the EPZ is, however, increasingly disputed. According to a study by the national statistics institute (INSEE) relating to the period 1982–93, 'the implementation of Education Priority Zones has had no significant effect on the success of pupils'. Indeed according to this study, all additional funds benefit teachers – who, since 1991, have received a premium of €1,097 per year – rather than pupils directly. Moreover the EPZ label is seen by parents as a signal that a school is 'bad', and thus plays the role of stigmatising. As a result, the numbers of pupils attending EPZ schools has been in continuous decline, with many parents seeking to avoid them.

In 2006, the Educational Priority Zone policy was revamped and Ambition to Succeed networks were established, initially involving 249 junior high schools. These establishments are former EPZ schools, but selected from amongst the most disadvantaged. Under the reform, these schools were intended to receive a

reinforcement of four 'guiding teachers' (*professeurs referents*) – innovative teachers intended to help the teams already in place. Teaching assistants – university students under supervision – have also been promised. In practice, it appears that these measures have not always been applied to the letter and have been criticised by some teacher unions.

## *Individual Level*

The measures implemented at a system and a school level show that the emphasis of public policy has not been on school dropout as such. It is helpful to recall the convergence of factors that resulted in 'dropout' being placed on the policy agenda (Glasman, 2003) in the 1990s. Firstly, there was a concern for public order. Pupils who are not where they should be are considered a threat. Secondly, young people with no qualifications represent the 'hard core' of teenage unemployment, and while successive governments have made tackling unemployment a priority, the workforce transition of young unqualified people has never been more problematic. Finally, in an epoch when half the age cohort stays on at school until age 20, those who leave before age 18 and without qualifications appear out of step.

As Bonnéry (2004) recalls, before early leaving became an issue in national education policy, it was 'scholastic failure' which mobilised agencies within the Ministry of Education, and led to policies at the individual level. According to Bonnéry, dropout is often seen as an advanced form of scholastic failure. As a consequence, the arrangements set in place to tackle failure – an 'old' phenomenon – have been redefined as targeting early leaving, more recently identified.

More precisely, measures combined to control early leaving have a double genealogy. They are not only heirs of strategies to tackle failure at school: the arrangements put in place by public authorities to tackle unemployment amongst young people now serve to support actions to reduce dropping out. Given these dual origins, it is difficult to isolate those measures that specifically address the problem of early leaving in the jungle of individual intervention. In fact, the missions of reducing failure at school, preventing dropout, and facilitating workforce transition are closely linked.

## *A Brief History of Intervention*

Starting in the middle of the 1980s, the question of workforce transition became increasingly important in educational policy, and the 'alternance' model of training and transition schemes expanded (Geay, 2003). In 1986, the program Transition Provision for Young People in the Education System (DIJEN, *dispositive d'insertion des jeunes de l'éducation nationale*) was established. This brought together the totality of diverse and localised measures for young people quitting junior high

school or senior high school without a qualification. The General Transition Mission (MGI, *Mission générale d'insertion*) replaced the DIJEN in 1992. As well as coordinating local arrangements, the MGI is meant to map students exiting from school who do not enrol in another school. Its role is also to intervene directly with families and young people and to encourage schools to adopt policies to prevent early leaving.

In 1999, the measures that were piloted under the MGI were formalised and expanded through the adoption of the New Chances program (*Nouvelle Chance*). Three major principles have guided this new program. Firstly is the idea that 'there is no uniformly valid solution for each young person, but rather a personal response'. The policy thus favoured individualised pathways. Secondly, the aim was to encourage innovation in teaching and experimental approaches. Finally, links with the world of work were necessary.

Given the large numbers of measures implemented under the MGI and their strongly local nature, it is possible to offer only a general overview here. Discussion will be limited to some preventative measures and training programs under the MGI and leave to one side other actions which relate directly to transition. Finally, it should be stressed that counter dropout measures do not all fall under the MGI banner. Many interventions occur at the local level, managed by schools or other agencies, and are too various and numerous to be reviewed here.

## *Prevention Measures Under Mission Générale d'Insertion, MGI*

These solutions aim at identifying pupils who are struggling with school work from junior high school on. The aim is to provide them with personalised support through 'on-site interviews' in which each young person can discuss issues with a psychology and guidance counsellor. Transition Support Groups (GAIN, *Groupes d'Aides à l'insertion*), also called 'oversight cells' (*cellules de veille*), are responsible for the tasks of monitoring and support. The groups are organised locally by school principals.

In 2006–07, nearly three in four of the 54,364 students benefitting from these one-to-one interviews subsequently undertook a training program; 3% entered the labour market.

## *Training Programs Under Mission Générale d'Insertion, MGI*

MGI networks also organise training programs. These can be part-time or full-time, and aim either to give short-term assistance to a young person or help them complete a recognised program of study or training.

1. Preparatory programs undertaken part-time

There are numerous schemes under this broad heading. In some cases, the larger group comprises young people who at the beginning of the school year are not enrolled in a school and who come under the wing of local guidance agencies. In other cases, the target group involves students in mainstream schooling, who in view of the difficulties they are experiencing, undertake supplementary classes or 're-engagement modules' (*modules de remotivation*) for a period ranging from several weeks to a full school year.

Amongst these measures, it is possible to distinguish 'relay classes' (*classes relais*), implemented from 1998 to 1999, and 'relay workshops' (*ateliers relais*) since 2002. The objective is to help 'tackle under-achievement and prevent social marginalisation' (Circular, 12 June 1998). 'Relay' programs enrol students from junior high school (and ultimately also senior high school) who are considered to have 'entered into a process of rejection of school' (*un processus de reject de l'institution scolaire*) as evident in 'failure to observe internal rules, persistent absenteeism from class, and even absence from school'. Relay classes are based on a partnership led by different government departments (education, justice, local government) and involve regional authorities and the voluntary sector.

Since their creation in 1998, the number of these programs has continued to grow. In 1999–2000, there were 180 with an intake of 2,600 students; this had grown to 360 by 2005–06, including 254 relay classes and 106 relay workshops. About 6,511 students were enrolled in the relay programs that year (Alluin, 2007; Poncet & Alluin, 2003).

Participation in these programs is overwhelmingly male: 78% in 2004–05, generally from 13 to 15 years old. Students usually come from the first to the fourth (and final) year of junior high school, mainly the general or mainstream programs (88% of all participants in 2004–05).

On average, students spend about 3 months in these programs. In 2004–05, 74% of students subsequently returned to junior high school and 4% entered vocational senior high school. No solution was found for 1–2% of participants.

After-exit statistics on participating students are weak: for all existing cohorts in 2003–04, non-response to a (follow-up) survey 6 months after exit was 35%.

2. Full-time programs

Full-time programs enrol students defined as having 'broken with school' and whose likelihood of completing a qualification within the usual time appears weak, given that they have already left school or are in the course of doing so. These programs run for varying periods, with year-round enrolment of students. They are characterised by individual support and supervision, workplace experience, and a focus on the 'basics' (literacy, numeracy).

Finally, some programs are designed mainly for young people exiting from the final year of vocational, technological or general senior high school streams who have failed the exams at least twice, or who have experienced severe problems in their school work. The aim is to help them prepare for the exams or to re-sit an examination.

Of the students who took part in a special learning program (N = 32,458), some 64% returned to a mainstream education program or undertook a new program, while 8% entered the labour market. Figures produced by the administering authority (MGI) tend to show that these initiatives, as well as preventative ones, are relatively effective. However, there is no available information on long-term outcomes, and the proportion of students who have neither returned to study nor found work is not small.

### *Alternative Pathways*

Outside of the measures which aim to prevent dropout or to intervene at the first signs of early leaving, there are few possibilities for dropouts to resume study once they have left. A 'second chance' school – the first to be created – was opened in 1998 in Marseille in response to the European Commission. Today, 36 such schools (called E2C or *école de la seconde chance*) enable about 4,000 young people aged 16–25 years and who left school at least 2 years ago to reacquire the fundamentals – reading, writing, numeracy – for a period of between 6 and 24 months, all the while learning for a job through a work placement. The training course is free. The schools are operated by associations which bring together numerous agencies within the local economy and various public authorities (Ministry of National Education, the council of the region, National Employment Association, municipalities, chambers of commerce, etc.) For the moment, no data are available on the outcomes from these second-chance schools.

Regarding continuing education, this has been progressively developed since 1971 under the umbrella of the Ministry of National Education. But by comparison with other European countries, this sector is fairly small. According to Eurostat, only 7.4% of adults aged 25–64 years took a 'formal' course in 2007 – that is, one leading to a qualification – or a 'non-formal' course designed by teaching staff, whereas the average for the European Union reaches 9.7%.

## Critical Views

While a solid statistical picture of outcomes is lacking in the medium to long term, certain aspects of the 'relay' programs (programs designed for those who have or are becoming disengaged from school) have been criticised. Geay (2005), in particular, has attacked the multiplication of relay measures in the absence of a debate about the stakes involved, whether social or academic.

With the 'massification' of school, which has occurred in a context of underemployment, segmentations internal to the population of school have developed. The diversification of tools to manage populations judged to be 'academically deviant' answers to this new state of play in which schooling becomes organised to cope with

diversity through the establishment of alternative programs that become treated as legitimate pathways rather than through tools to combat the antecedents of dropout.

The multiplication of localised programs would, on this interpretation, be symptomatic of a 'massified' school system which, unable to offer adaptive conditions of learning – to avoid difficulties from the outset – does not succeed in treating its dysfunctions other than through specific and localised initiatives, thus throwing into question the notion of genuine comprehensive schooling (*l'école unique*).

## *What 'Lines of Action' Are Needed for Reconnection with School?*

Concluding a study of dropping out, Glasman has sought to identify 'lines of action', keeping in mind that reflection on what is possible and pertinent should not assume that there is one set of solutions corresponding to a set of typical situations: 'there's nothing to say that what reconnects one student will reconnect another' (Glasman & Oeuvrard, 2004). Glasman also invites us to consider the problem under its wider social aspect, and thus not to ask schooling to do what it cannot do. For research shows that the practices of disconnecting from school are fuelled largely by the socioeconomic conditions of families, influenced directly by poverty, unemployment and precariousness.

Stressing these limits, what are the lines of action for a 'reconnection with school'? Disengagement from school owes its origins in many cases to a failure to connect and progress in school, and this can occur from the youngest age – the point of entry to school. Given this, it would be necessary to address growing gaps in student learning in primary school, with support in the first and second years of junior high school often coming too late (even if early learning problems are not always detectable).

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