

France: Permanence and Change

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Abstract The chapter focuses on important evolutions of educational issues nested in a broader ideological and economic context in France since 2000. It first describe these changes, the transformation of the ideological context they reflect, and the new framework they set up for political issues and concrete reforms. Then it analyzes four main aspects of education reform: the growing individualistic perspective on education, the stress put on choice, the development of autonomy and decentralization, and the obsession with evaluation and benchmarking. Lastly, in conclusion, it discusses the anticipated reform trends in France in an ever-changing political context.

Keywords Educational policy • Expansion of coverage • Inclusion of lagging students • School choice • Selective processes • Social disparities • France

Within countries such as France, the State's responsibility for education has been firmly established for many years in a wide variety of political contexts, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century. This is because education is viewed as an important factor in both individual and societal development. The State's responsibility, in this respect, includes a myriad of dimensions, the two most important being a civic concern to educate citizens to participate effectively in public life and an economic concern to equip students with appropriate workplace skills. It could also be maintained that education is the main ideological means used to justify the remaining inequalities in democratic countries where individuals are considered as equal and education-based meritocracy is the rule. That would explain why, whatever the ideological changes, educational issues—especially expanding educational opportunities—have always been very important on political agendas.

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However, educational issues are nested in a broader ideological and economic context, and important evolutions have taken place, especially since 2000. In the first section, I will describe these changes, the transformation of the ideological context they reflect, and the new framework they set up for political issues and concrete reforms (for a deeper historical view, see Robert 2010; Duru-Bellat and van Zanten 2001). Then I will analyze four main directions in which this broad ideological climate is seen: the growing individualistic perspective on education, the stress put on choice, the development of autonomy and decentralization, and the obsession with evaluation and benchmarking. When empirical research is available, I will shed some light on the effects of these policies. Lastly, in conclusion, I will discuss the anticipated reform trends in France in an ever-changing political context.

1 The Transformation of the Ideological Context: From Democratization to Meritocracy

Until the end of the twentieth century, French education policies were dominated by the expansion and democratization of education in a global post-World War II European context. The general trend was to “go comprehensive,” i.e., unify schooling, especially at the lower-secondary level, both to increase the mean level of education and promote equal opportunity.

1.1 Expand and Unify to Achieve Democratization

In France, several institutional reforms occurred between 1959 and 1975 in order to unify the system of education. Older educational tracks (with vocational short tracks for the poorest pupils from age 14) were discontinued, and a common unified curriculum was made compulsory. In addition, any track selection was postponed to the end of the lower-secondary level (at age 15 or 16). However, it took some time (and subsequent acts) for this to be achieved, and it has only been mandatory for every French student to attend all 4 years of lower-secondary school since the 1980s. In any case, these acts did produce an initial wave of expansion in the number of students attending school (Duru-Bellat 2007, 2008). However, the strong social inequalities that French sociologists (such as Pierre Bourdieu) had denounced in the 1960s continued, especially at the end of lower-secondary school (“collège”) when students were tracked either toward upper-secondary schools (“lycée”) or toward vocational tracks, so that the inequalities were mostly shifted to a higher level.

Thus, a second wave of reforms was implemented in the late 1980s, both to increase the mean level of education and to try to reduce the gap between social groups in this respect. The easiest way to achieve this was to increase access to upper-secondary school, which was done; France has experienced a dramatic educational expansion since the 1960s. After a steady increase in the percentage

of students passing the “baccalauréat” (the exam at the end of secondary school, necessary for gaining access to tertiary education) from about 5 % in 1950 to 28 % in the early 1980s, the political objective of “80 % of a generation achieving the baccalauréat” was set in 1981. This goal gave the evolution a boost, and the figure rose rapidly to 55 % in 1993 and 63 % in 2005 (it has been stuck between 63 % and 65 % since around 2000).

Elevating the educational level of the younger generations was one of the main targets of the socialist government that took office in France in 1981. It was reiterated by all subsequent administrations, in spite of their various political leanings. Amazingly, the educational goals met a consensus seldom observed in this country in political matters. This is because it was grounded on the strong meritocratic foundation of French society, which gives central and legitimate importance to the diploma as a tool for shaping one's life. Merit and the correlative issue of equality of opportunities were very central themes of Nicolas Sarkozy's first presidential campaign (in 2007). This consensus concerning merit and education as a conveyor of social justice is also easily understandable because it matches the European discourse about the evolution toward the so-called knowledge economy. Moreover, and just as importantly, it meets the interests of all the actors in question. For the State, expanding education requires significant funds but has the advantage of keeping a mass of young people away from the job market (and thus from unemployment). Of course, teachers themselves are satisfied because this expansion enlarges their labor market and reinforces their influence in French society. For parents, it looks reassuring to have their children increasingly better educated so that they can cope with an uncertain future and job market. The same is true for employers, who are in favor of this expansion of public education since they did not pay anything for it. Thus, the “more education” policy has a large consensus, since no one can overtly go against increasing equality of opportunities.

This educational expansion has resulted in some democratization (Duru-Bellat and Kieffer 2001), but it has been achieved through the development of a variety of baccalauréats and tracks in the tertiary level (diversifying a “product” is one way to attract new customers). An example was the creation of the “baccalauréat professionnel” in 1985, which was created to give access to the baccalauréat-level education to students studying vocational tracks. These students are mostly from low socioeconomic backgrounds and have encountered difficulties in school early on, because these vocational tracks are considered as less demanding than general ones.

Today in France, about 23 % of each generation graduates with a tertiary degree equivalent to a Bachelor's degree (i.e., 3 years of post-baccalauréat education) and 42 % graduates with a tertiary degree of some level. However, while France, according to the OECD, is among the top countries in terms of the number of tertiary students (South Korea and Canada have more), important social inequalities are still observed (Duru-Bellat 2007; see also OECD 2010). For example, among those students who entered lower-secondary school in 1995, 88 % of socially privileged students received the baccalauréat, compared to 41 % of students from least qualified working-class backgrounds. Moreover, educational inequalities are increasingly taking a qualitative form, with a growing trend toward some “social specialization” of the various tracks. Today, among those students who reach the last year of

upper-secondary school, about 40 % of socially privileged children follow the scientific track, compared to about 5 % of students from least qualified working-class backgrounds. The latter are much more likely to study vocational tracks. And since 1985, the development of the “baccalauréat professionnel” has been an important component of this “segregative democratization” (students from the lowest socioeconomic groups and with unemployed parents account for about 70 % of the students following this track).

Similarly, we are presently facing a segregative democratization at the tertiary level: the percentage of students from working-class backgrounds is increasing across the board, but in the meantime, their numbers in elite schools is remaining stable or is even slightly decreasing. Among those French children born between 1959 and 1968, about 21 % of upper-class children attended an elite school, compared to less than 1 % of working-class children. The most prestigious elite schools in France (e.g., polytechnic and HEC) are able to control (and restrict) the size of their student body, which they have done over the last decades, while French public universities are required to enroll all candidates, since the baccalauréat automatically gives a student the right to enter any track he or she desires. Thus, the democratization at that level has been “absorbed” by the universities.

In general, while we observed a generalized downward trend in the association between education and social origin (because the least advanced students are catching up with the most advanced) in France at the end of the twentieth century, this is compatible with remarkably stable (or even increasing) social inequality in transitions at more advanced stages of the educational system. And the differentiation that was implemented to boost expansion—e.g., the professional baccalauréat—has channeled these newcomers to higher secondary education into specific tracks. In the last 20 years, more children from disadvantaged families have received the baccalauréat, but they have been funneled into the new vocational tracks created at that level, thus diverted from the traditional general tracks. While there would be no sense in saying that the latter are of better value, one thing is sure: these tracks lead to tertiary education with higher chances of success, which in turn generally results in better opportunities on the job market.

1.2 A Shifting Stress to Equity

During the economic crisis of the 1980s, the ideals of the 1960s began to fade, and “going adaptable” (rather than “going comprehensive”) in education in order to face economic competition and boost employment progressively took priority on the agenda. This evolution itself was nested in the spreading global liberal climate and materialized notably in the “New Public Management” principles, which emphasized the individualization and efficiency of previously public goods. This broad trend was embedded in an overall evolution toward more individualism. It also possibly involved a certain resignation concerning the possibility of really reducing inequalities. If such was the case, it would be easier to focus on the reduction of the inequalities of opportunities between individuals rather than on structural inequalities.

In recent years, this is why equity, rather than equality, has been on the agenda more and more often. It is important to underline the meaning of this change, which is not only a semantic slide. Equity differs from equality since it implies the distinction between fair and unfair inequalities. That runs counter to the earlier conception of fairness in France, which has long been equated with sameness, i.e., catering to all the students in a strictly identical manner. Equity amounts to treating students in an unequal way precisely because they are unequal (especially because they face unequal starting conditions). In education, formal equality of treatment is unfair as long as there are “objective” inequalities between families. Thus, at school, some degree of “positive discrimination” (or “affirmative action,” notably allotting more resources to certain students) is legitimated in order to level the playground so that truly fair competition may take place. Thus, equity refers to the current concept of equality of opportunities, which is supposed to justify later inequalities in performance at school and rewards in adult life. Ultimately, some inequalities may be judged fair: whenever a child receives a chance, only his or her merit and effort will justify the result. The notion of equity suggests that we should not stick to the single notion of equality but rather should focus on the question of which inequalities we can consider fair: some inequalities of performance may be judged as fair, under some conditions, if the competition was fair or if equality of opportunities was secured. Following the North American model, the notion of “positive discrimination” is now widely accepted in Europe, while inequalities of achievement between students are often viewed with a certain fatalism; this is one of the notion’s downsides among the many that deserve some consideration (see Sect. 2.1).

2 Some Recent Policies and Some Hints as to Their Impact

2.1 *An Individualistic Conception of Education*

In France, the neoliberal approach to education has resulted in the increased stress placed on individual success and on the notion of merit (for a comprehensive discussion, see Duru-Bellat 2009). What is at stake then is the detection of brilliant students from lower socioeconomic statuses or ethnic minorities. Starting in 2007 (after the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as president of France), some specific “add-ons” have been offered to these students, such as extra lessons, boarding schools (“internats d’excellence”), and specific “merit grants”.

However, one might ask whether it is truly possible to detect merit. In France, as in most European countries (but to a lesser degree in northern Europe), social inequality of achievement is detected at a very early age, even before primary school. As early as 4 or 5 years old, the gap between children whose parents are mid- or upper-level professionals and those whose parents are unskilled manual workers is about 1.2 standard deviation gap (on the basis of cognitive and linguistic tests). These early cognitive inequalities, which can be tied to varied conditions of upbringing, have a determinative influence over achievement level in primary school, and

both preschool (“*école maternelle*”) and the first years of primary schooling prove insufficient in offsetting them. This is problematic, since it is impossible to detect “merit” if the playground was not level at the outset.

Later in life, these achievement inequalities tend to increase since a cumulative deficit process is generally in place. This is because a student’s academic achievement level at the start of the academic year at all school levels is the main factor responsible for the academic level at the end of the year. Just as prior achievement is linked to a student’s family characteristics, social inequality is “retranslated” into academic level. Nobody would dare, at such an early stage, consider that these achievement inequalities are the outcome of inequality of merit. During subsequent stages of the schooling career, inequalities continue to accumulate even more markedly (Duru-Bellat 2007). One reason for this is that the school organization at the secondary level provides more individual choices, and thus some families develop strategies to draw benefits from what appear to them to be advantageous opportunities. These range from the choice of some subjects, to educational track decisions, and even to the choice of the school itself. Here again, nobody would consider that these mainly strategic and distinctive choices have something to do with merit itself.

Starting in 2008, the overarching neoliberal climate and specific policies gave “deserving” students (those with high achievement levels and a disadvantaged background) more freedom to choose their own school, thus spreading the idea that if you are able to seize those opportunities offered to you, you can succeed. More or less overtly, this suggests that education is no longer a public resource or a universal right that the State owes all its citizens but rather a private good that one may or may not get and whose quality results from an individual’s choices and is that individual’s responsibility. This notion translates into the now commonly used (in the neoliberal climate) term of “empowerment,” which amounts to convincing people that they are responsible for their life and are able to find individual solutions to their problems on their own. From this perspective, that is why school choice is promoted: since it now appears obvious that the State is no longer able to provide equal quality education in all school settings, students simply have to escape from bad schools if they want to maximize their own chances.

This trend toward more choice is too recent for its effects to be estimated precisely. However, in a context of growing employment problems for young people, one might expect that as long as education continues to be a valued positional good, giving students more opportunities of choice will continue to reinforce inequality as long as students and their families have unequal resources and opportunities.

2.2 More Allowance for Individual Choices Generates More Segregation Between Schools

Whenever school choice is promoted (in France as in comparable European countries), research shows that student overall mean achievement does not improve. Rather, quite conversely, it generates a chain of mechanisms that foster inequality. It is now

widely admitted that when the school choice is completely open (as in Belgium), it generates a marked hierarchical academic ranking of schools, which are also more socially segregated. In France, the first analysis of the effects of the school choice option given to families (starting in 2007) shows that it has increased social segregation in a number of schools, especially in Paris and large cities, since only the most privileged families have the resources needed to make the choice (information, money to cover transportation costs or other various arrangements, etc.). Consequently, the policy increases social inequality since segregation itself fosters inequality. A variety of mechanisms are involved here.

First, one should underline the fact that social sorting between schools is associated with larger disparities between students, in terms of both academic results and social origins, while the overall mean performance is not improved. This suggests that the total influence of student background on level of achievement is explained in part by the school attended and not only by some cultural disadvantages. This strong trend—segregation actually fosters educational inequality—results in large part from what is now labeled “peer effect.” Research shows that the composition of the student body itself contributes to creating an environment of uneven quality, because classmates are resources for each other. It also impacts the ambiance of the daily classroom life as well as the teaching practices it allows or not. In fact, students from working-class backgrounds attending mixed-intake schools progress better (for France, see Duru-Bellat 2007). This is because they benefit from contact with students who are better adjusted to school norms and have greater cultural resources and thus are less prone to developing anti-school attitudes. In these environments, they also develop more ambitious educational aspirations.

So, across the board, a balanced social mix improves both student academic progress and attitudes without being detrimental to the mean level of achievement. It especially boosts the weakest students, while putting only a slight brake on the most brilliant ones. Thus, as long as more privileged parents continue to look for social or academic resemblance when choosing schools (knowing that the quest for social resemblance seems more important than the quest strictly for academic excellence), and parents whose children would benefit more from heterogeneity continue to be less prone to choosing, more choice will result in increased educational inequality.

Another group of mechanisms relates to the unevenness of teaching resources provided in these segregated contexts. Often the most privileged tracks or schools attract greater financial resources and, more importantly, more qualified and experienced teachers (since experienced teachers are more effective in teaching). Moreover, teachers develop higher expectations when confronted with more promising students, and curriculum content coverage generally improves, so that all across the board, students have more opportunities to learn. All in all, program provision and, more globally, the quality of a school’s offering are key mechanisms by which inequalities are reinforced. The contrastive environments formed by schools serving advantaged or disadvantaged students provide unequal settings of both learning and socialization. This is because, in any educational setting, social intake is a key ingredient because of the psychosocial dynamics between teachers and students and among students themselves.

Consequently, choice and social sorting between schools raise a problem of efficiency and fairness: while the efficiency of this new style of school “management” remains quite uncertain, it could be maintained that, in France as anywhere else, a common level of knowledge would be better promoted if students were educated together in the same schools.

2.3 Decentralization or “Marketization” of Education?

In the meantime, the growing concern regarding efficiency and State disengagement, as well as the obsession with downsizing costs, has led to recommendations that education systems become more “flexible” (this term is often used by promoters of the European Lisbon strategy) and decentralized. That is the reason why, along with ideological considerations, school autonomy and the decentralization of the education system are promoted. Although decentralization may also be part of a left-wing climate underlying actor autonomy and adaptation to students as they are, over the last several decades, the underlying references here have (again) been the New Public Management principles. What is at stake is increasing competition, with reference to the model of a perfect and very efficient market. One might add that it is this ideology which also led to the higher development of private education in many countries (but not so much in France in comparison with other European countries). Thus, one may use the term “marketization” of education, although it may have rather limited application in France.

Concretely, the expressed motives for educational decentralization are diverse. First, it is supposed to increase efficiency because teachers and staff would have more freedom to adapt their practices to their local student body. Moreover, it aims to limit bureaucracy and allows for a better financial control. And, just as importantly, it is supposed to raise school responsiveness to local communities: consumers would be given more power to push for teacher improvement, so that the latter would have more incentives to improve their own practices. Educational decentralization may affect different levels of decision-making: human resource management (e.g., appointing teachers), student policies (e.g., school admissions), financial resources (school budget), and curricula (content, textbooks). European countries present a patchwork of situations in these respects, but it should be noted that France (and others countries, such as Portugal) is rather resistant to the global trend toward decentralization, compared with other countries that, in different historical contexts, have already implemented strong decentralization, often for several decades (e.g., the United Kingdom and some Eastern European countries).

Across the board, contrary to what was expected—that “marketized” education would be more efficient—the relationship between the various aspects of school autonomy and mean student performance proves to be weak, and the widespread positive expectations that exist in regard to school autonomy and decentralization of decision-making are not supported. Some studies (Wossman 2007) find a positive correlation between higher degrees of school autonomy in certain respects and

average student performance, but the causality remains uncertain, as is always the case with cross-sectional data, such as PISA surveys (assessing student performance at age 15). Moreover, other studies (for a synthesis, see Teese and Lamb 2007; van den Branden et al. 2011) suggest that decentralization proves detrimental to performance homogeneity, fostering larger inequalities.

Today, it is widely agreed that without a centrally geared monitoring system and control of standards, decentralization and the correlative adaptation of schools to their student body are bound to cause increased achievement disparity and different forms of social inequalities. Even if this remains an open issue (see Duru-Bellat and Meuret 2003, comparing England and France), the best way to boost efficiency without damaging equity and social cohesion seems to be to implement, along with decentralization, some national control, notably for setting standards and managing evaluation. This kind of evolution has taken place in some European countries, but in France there is still today some reluctance toward centralized and standardized evaluations, from teachers who fear that it may be used to assess their own efficiency. That makes the present trend toward decentralization even more risky.

In a broader sense, decentralization may also mean opening schools (and more broadly, educational decisions) to other partners. Some global policies used in disadvantaged areas are moving in that direction. Here also, we have been facing an important twofold shift in most European countries (and especially in France): (i) in order to even out the quality of what schools offer to every pupil, it is now widely admitted that some “positive discrimination” must be implemented; (ii) it is no longer considered better to focus on individuals (on the weakest students, as discussed above in this paper), but rather to focus on schools, and still more often on specific larger geographical areas.

This latter strategy has been implemented in France since the 1980s with “Zones d’Education Prioritaire (ZEP)” which were inspired by the former British “Education Priority Action” and defined on the basis of the socioeconomic characteristics of the population. The rationale here is that since the problems encountered by students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are multiple, a variety of partners and institutions must be called upon to help, including street educators, policemen, and social workers. Objective evaluations of the impact of this kind of action focused on whole areas have been disappointing: even if some positive results in achievement and attitudes may have resulted, they were canceled out by the negative impact of the stigma attached to the schools and areas in question. However, some argue that this evolution may have been even worse without this kind of action because of the increased social segregation often observed in those areas as a result of middle-class flight. The public funds may also be targeted too loosely, since as many as one out of four schools at the lower-secondary level were included in the French ZEPs.

In 2006, a new program called “ambition réussite” (operation success) was launched. It is more strictly targeted and attempts to attract more experienced teachers to these areas as well as to provide more individualized help. Moreover, it also helps give students with good results access to the best upper-secondary or tertiary schools through special admission regulations and extra subsidies, with the goal of boosting student motivation during lower-secondary school. Again, the stress is put on

“empowering” actors with the hope of increased efficiency. The risk here is that those students unable to flee their neighborhood’s poorest schools will be still more disadvantaged in contexts still more segregated. In that sense, even if the obsession with performance and testing is a criticized component of “New Public Management”, the central State’s concern with what is learnt at school can be seen as all the more justifiable since the system is decentralized. Actually, it could be argued that this is precisely the case in France, since, in 2005, a special educational act (see www.loi.ecole.gouv.fr) included the concept of a “socle commun de connaissances,” i.e., a common core knowledge that should be acquired by every French student leaving the compulsory schooling. So, despite the (uncertain) feasibility of the objective and the neoliberal climate of this period, the responsibility of the State is reaffirmed.

2.4 *The Increasing Obsession with Benchmarking*

In recent decades, OECD has attempted to disseminate a way of defining education priorities, and Europe has been increasingly involved in channeling educational policies (Ertl 2006). However, the European Union has no legal way to enforce them. So, these international influences operate on a continual process of “peer pressure” (one might even call it a “naming and shaming” process) based on benchmarking with a search for “best practices.” This process has been institutionalized under the label “open coordination method”, i.e., voluntary cooperation on the basis of the exchange of experiences.

So, monitoring has become crucial, and in following with the Lisbon objectives, working programs have been developed that bring together stakeholders and experts to support the implementation of these objectives through exchange of best practices, study visits, and peer reviews. Concretely, a set of objectives to be reached by 2010 (and now by 2020) was adopted with precise quantitative benchmarks (see “Progress Towards the Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training”, SEC 2007, 1284). They include participation in preschool education, civic skills, the percentage of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading literacy, participation of adults in lifelong learning, and the level of educational achievement of the whole population. Regular reports give the figures for the 27 European Union countries, identifying those performing well in particular areas so that their expertise and good practices may be shared with others.

Of course, the risk is to encourage only quantitative targets with unexpected side effects. Such is the case of France. Since the 1980s, France has worked hard to develop its upper-secondary level of education in order to close the gap with other countries in the percentage of students graduating from upper-secondary school. As evoked before, France has faced a dramatic expansion of education since the 1980s in response to the “80 % of a generation achieving the baccalauréat” political objective set by the left-wing government in 1981. The expansion of the education system was one of the main targets of the socialist government that took office in

France in 1981. It was reiterated by all subsequent governments; the last act, passed in 2005, was no exception (reaffirming again 80 % of a generation achieving a baccalauréat and 50 % a tertiary degree). Starting in the 1980s, these objectives met a large consensus, since they were aimed at closing the gap with our neighbors and were also supposed to help reduce disparities among French students while increasing the mean level of achievement. However, research shows (Duru-Bellat 2008) that in recent decades more baccalauréat education has been accompanied by some deterioration of the degree holders' perspectives on the job market: for example, the baccalauréat-leavers' opportunities to avoid a manual or poorly qualified clerk job have declined between the 1970s and 2009 from 60 % to 23 % (Chauvel 2010). A consequence is that social inequalities have been shifting to a higher level rather than being canceled out. France is a very good example of the fact that expanding education may paradoxically be what allows social inequalities to persist. As many sociologists now admit, growth operates here both as a safety valve and as a counterreform, allowing things not to change.

While the French government has continued with the consensual political aim of expanding education (today with the objective of 50 % of a generation achieving a tertiary degree, following European directives), this continuous growth is still accompanied by 8 % of a generation leaving the education system without any degree whatsoever. Obviously, to focus on the benchmark "percentage achieving the upper-secondary level" leads to making some public funding choices, since France is not rich enough to allocate all of its public resources to education. Thus, this precludes spending on other areas for which a better case could be made, such as quality pre-primary schooling for underprivileged students. Here one might underline that a list of benchmarks is not a substitute for a program or a global education policy. One reason for this is that focusing on one area or domain would possibly lead to the neglect of another as long as no priorities have been set.

To come back to expanding the system and increasing access rates, it should be stressed that not only does this policy have monetary costs but it also has poorly assessed and even taboo social and psychological costs. Many studies have shed light on some unexpected and undesired effects of expanding education beyond a certain threshold (generally achieved in European countries). What has been shown is that not only does the fact that degrees have become more numerous and increasingly necessary for employment (which is the case in France) not generate a fairer society but it also progressively spoils the content of education itself. It becomes a commodity, rather than a good, that is extremely useful but not really interesting in and of itself. In 1976, the American sociologist Ronald Dore described what he called the "diploma disease" in developing countries, i.e., examination-oriented schooling, with detrimental effects on the quality of learning as well as on subsequent attitudes toward learning, such as ritualism, and mostly no intrinsic interest in knowledge. In the same way, research in France shows that from the higher secondary school to some university tracks, students seem mostly interested in the grades they get, the exams they pass, and what returns they achieve with it, rather than in the content of the studies themselves. Curiosity or pleasure to learn seems to fade out, and the main objective is no longer to learn but rather to get the certification needed to gain employment.

Moreover, when these utilitarian students enter the labor market, their disillusion is often great. As early as 1978, the French sociologist Bourdieu identified what he called a “deceived generation,” who, facing the gap between their diplomas and the real job market opportunities, would adopt a disillusioned attitude both toward work and political life or even a more offensive one leading to protest. And this is not only a matter of disillusion but also of personal suffering: as competition becomes harsher, education largely becomes a positional good that many students must fail to master, since the winners must not be too numerous if there is something to be won.

Thus, failure must be accepted as a necessary part of the selection process by both students and politicians if some value associated with the degree is to be preserved. At the macro level, the fact is that competition is becoming tougher and tougher and the growing sense of economic insecurity (which is very strong among French young people) is having broader, yet to be identified undesirable effects.

However, despite this competition, one may consider across the board that some symbolic efficiency is achieved if the conviction that you deserve the rank you obtain in a continuous competition remains ingrained; if so, as Bourdieu would say, the inequalities are legitimized. But the hypothesis could be made that the growing gap between degrees and jobs obtained may throw some doubt on the meritocratic way in which the whole system operates (Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012). Opening schools and developing access to education are supposed to convey more meritocracy and consequently more social justice. Facts and analysis by sociologists of education show that this is fiction (albeit a necessary one). As long as degrees have some value on the labor market and, consequently, as long as education has mainly positional effects, one cannot hope to reduce social inequalities by opening the system. This is because by so doing (and as long as inequalities are maintained within society, with unequal families striving for unequal positions), inequalities will only be perpetuated. Meritocracy and equality of opportunity promise equity in the race for success, not equality in results and certainly not in economic life.

Thus, continuing with “more of the same,” i.e., simply increasing access to education, is not an efficient strategy. First, “openness” may take on the appearance of a less overtly class-biased policy, e.g., school choice. It always sounds generous to give more, and in France, during recent decades, expanding education has been promoted as a means in and of itself. It has taken the form of pure quantitative targets, leading to the neglect of the question of not only the “quantity” of education but also its “quality,” i.e., what kind of education, for whom, and for what purpose. This is more or less because the blind race for benchmarks is prevailing, that is, driven more by economic rationale rather than by true educational concern.

This is not to say that setting quantitative objectives is a bad thing. Quite the opposite, since while doing so, policymakers are required to express precisely what objectives they put forward and show responsibility for whether or not these objectives are fulfilled. Moreover, pressures to define and regulate standards through national curricula and national systems of assessment are rather beneficial to disadvantaged students and, more broadly, preserve some homogeneity within a country’s youth.

3 Conclusion

In France, a new left-wing government was formed in June 2012, and it is too early to make precise predictions of future trends of French education policy. However, the new Minister of Education, Vincent Peillon, quickly announced changes that are supposed to achieve a broad “refoundation” of the school system.

First, the downsizing of the number of teachers will cease, and starting in September 2012, more teachers will be sent to the poorest areas: 1,000 extra teachers have been recruited for primary schools, knowing that 5,100 primary teacher positions were eliminated by the previous government. Second, in order to attract more youngsters to the teaching profession, a training period will be reimplemented (trainings were canceled during the previous government). More significantly, the Minister maintains that the priority will be given to lower school levels (to reduce early inequalities), so that, in a context of scarcity, less weight will be given to higher education. He is also stressing citizen education, with the idea of introducing some civic and moral courses to the curricula. Some issues of debate, such as school choice, school calendar (the length of French holidays and the resulting long school days), and student assessment on the basis of national standardized tests have yet to be documented at this stage; a special consultation is ongoing.

Two remarks may be made here. First, the current economic context and the objective of reducing public spending will obviously limit educational ambitions, and the pressure to assess efficiency will remain very strong even if it is unpopular among French teachers. Second, it is not sure that a broad consensus will emerge on educational issues, which remain in France very passionate and meet diverging private interests (different social groups may benefit from improved pre-primary schooling or more resources in tertiary education). In any case, in France, left-wing parties have always given importance to public education, as expected by teachers and parents. In a rather pessimistic global context, successfully fostering some hopes and achieving mobilization in schools would be a first step toward success.

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