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The education systems of Europe: France¹

History of the school system

Cultural context and cornerstones of the historical development of schooling

The French educational system received its theoretical foundations through the ideas of the French Revolution of 1789; the basis of its real shape, however, was conferred only at the end of the 19th century by the education acts of the Third Republic concerning, in particular, primary education. Indeed, the promoters of the French Revolution did not have the financial means at their disposal to realize their ideas concerning ‘education for all’. The priority of educational policy under Napoleon’s regime, however, was rather the extension of secondary education (the lycée) in order to train the elite for the new state (Hörner 1996, p. 83).

The construction of a primary education system was an initiative of the Third Republic. Induced by the defeat of 1871, interpreted as the ‘victory of the Prussian school master’, the founders of the new republic wanted to create a system of compulsory education able to integrate all children of France (even Basques or Bretons) in love of the unique French fatherland. Their central aim was to instil them the loyalty of (secular) republican values based on the ideas of enlightenment in opposition to the Catholic schools of past times. Whereas in many other western countries the process of secularisation ended in a common non-denominational Christian morality as a basis of the values transmitted in school, the French notion of ‘laïcité’ (secularity) as the ideological foundation of the republican school had an imminent anti-clerical character, as the Catholic church in the past had sided with the enemies of the republic.

According to this logic, the foundations of French compulsory education were laid in a series of education acts whose essentials are still valid. Ever since then, school has had to be: compulsory (obligatoire), free of charge (gratuit) and secular (laïque) i.e. ideologically neutral. Religious instruction was only possible outside school. In order to allow parents to send their children to religious instruction one day of the week was kept free of lessons.

The school legislation of the late 19th century only concerned primary education. Secondary education was a quite different part of the school system having its own elementary classes, as distinct from primary schools for children of bourgeois families. As it was also possible for performing primary pupils to go to the upper cycle of primary education (école primaire supérieure) or to follow complementary courses (cours complémentaires) in order to prepare the entry examination of a teacher training school (école normale) whose completion gave the equivalent of the baccalaureate, one can say that until the second half of the 20th century there were in France two different school systems which had no real contact between them: the primary education cycle with the possibility for the best pupils to go to higher education by a devious route of primary teacher training on the one hand, and the system of secondary education with its own elementary classes on the other. It was only after the Second World War that an entrance examination to secondary education for primary pupils was introduced and the elementary classes for secondary schools were abolished - the very last ones in the late 1950s (cf. also Prost 1986).

Reforms and innovations

In fact, the first attempts to create a common school for all go back to the end of the First World War. After the Second World War these endeavours gained fresh impetus. From 1945 to 1959 there were many attempts at a great school -reform, but these propositions did not receive a majority in parliament. It was only at the beginning of the Fifth Republic (the era of de Gaulle) that a rather pragmatic process of secondary school reform was initiated in small steps. At its provisional end there was a new Education

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Act in 1975, promoted by the Conservative majority. The new act provided a school system organized at different horizontal levels. Its core was a non-selective secondary school for all young people, embracing grades 6 to 9. After this common core a ramified system of upper secondary education embraced different tracks of general, technical and vocational education. This fundamental structure was only modified in certain details during subsequent years. It was confirmed in the Education Acts of 1989 and 2005.

Socio-cultural context of the current school system

Educational targets and general function of school

In the collective awareness of the French nation education has a pronounced value. This value has its historical roots in the consciousness of the French nation concerning its cultural mission to the world (*rayonnement de la civilisation française*) that goes back to the era of Enlightenment. Indeed, this idea of Enlightenment has an universal range: the ‘light of reason’ must shine for everybody in the same way without distinction. Moreover, French has been for long centuries the language of the crowned heads of Europe and is still nowadays the language of diplomacy.

So, cultural self-consciousness is closely linked to French language, literature and philosophy. This particularity is rooted in the history of French education: in the 17th century the French interpretation of European humanism in the *collèges* of the Jesuit Fathers was marked by a rhetoric character (whereas in Germany it was rather the philosophical side that was stressed). The great value of language-based education as a favourite expression of national culture is indicated by the broad public debates of curricular reforms in mother tongue education or, as another example the great interest that mass media have on the national level in the topics of the written final examination (*baccalauréat*) in the field of mother tongue education or philosophy.

The high societal value of schooling in general has its roots also in the revolutionary impetus of the principle of *égalité* as one of the three fundamental concepts

of French society. The link between school and society is provided by the meritocratic principle: the allocation of social positions is provided by personal achievement, initially grounded in school achievement. Thus school, as an objective institution, distributing life chances according to its own criteria, assumes an immense importance in the life of society. The fact that since the 1960s French sociologists have demonstrated again and again the subtle social mechanisms by which school serves the reproduction of existing social conditions is not a contradiction but rather complementary to the first observation.

The uncontested value of school is apparently grounded in students’ awareness too, for students in French schools record a significantly greater contentment with their schools compared for example to German students (Czerwenka 1990).

The high societal value of schooling is legally reflected in the guiding principles of the Education Act of 1989 published under the symbolic date of July 14th 1989, two hundred years after the French Revolution (see Loi 1989): The Education Act states that by the end of the century, 80% of children are to enter the last grade of upper secondary education obtaining the right to pass the *baccalauréat* examination. This aim meant not less than the doubling of successful secondary education leaver rates (in 1986 only 47% of an age class arrived at the last grade of secondary education). ‘Secondary education for all’ as a ‘national aim’ in France is in no way a topic of certain (left wing) parties, but constitutes a political consensus of the political class independently from the political orientation.

However one thing has to be made clear: the *baccalauréat*, as the final secondary examination (see below), concerns not only the general academic track, but includes technical and vocational tracks too, giving together the right to enter Higher Education. These technical diplomas already give a certain qualification for the labour-market. Nearly half of all secondary education diplomas giving access to Higher Education concern these ‘double qualifications’. The official statistical data of the bacheliers in 2000 show that this educational policy target has been (slightly) missed: the quota of successful school leavers was 62% (Renault 2001).

These guiding principles of educational policy mirror a phenomenon that has characterized the French education system since the beginning of the 19th century: The tension between egalitarian mass schooling and the forming of elites has its historical roots in the afore-mentioned double tracks of modern French schooling in the revolutionary conceptual heritage taken over in the strict meritocratic hierarchy of the Napoleonian state. The tension gets its structural forms in the polarity between the claim for ‘secondary education for all’ and a highly selective tripartite system of Higher Education with the ‘Grandes Ecoles’ at the top (see below).

Socio-economic context

The focus of educational policy is linked to the baccalauréat, for this examination can be considered as the central tool for determining a person’s place in French society. This logic corresponds to the guiding data of the French economic system, both on the macro- and on the micro-level. In French industrial plants, there is a great number of highly qualified people on the basis of a baccalauréat compared to other European countries, a fact that evidently affects the place of bacheliers on the labour market (Maurice et al. 1982).

Such a policy, oriented to mass education on a high level, has evidently to overcome a certain number of social obstacles. In 1999/2000 (latest data available – see RRS 2004, p. 71) 5.9% of all children in primary education had a foreign nationality. Almost half of them - 45.9% - came from North-Africa, 12.9% from Black-Africa and 10% from Portugal. In the same year the immigrant quota for secondary education was 5.1% - it fell to 4.3% in 2003/04. Since the 1980s the percentage of immigrant children is constantly decreasing. The falling rate of immigrants in school is due to a more restrictive immigration policy and to an easier naturalisation policy. However, this form of naturalisation does not necessarily mean social integration. On the other hand, the immigrant rate shows regional disparities: it is particularly high in the districts of Paris, Corsica and Strasbourg. In any case, the integration of the children with an immigration background constitutes a great challenge to the French school system (Lacerda 2000).

Social position of the teaching profession

Traditionally, French primary teachers had a tremendous role in the society of the Third Republic as they had to disseminate the values of the nation in the newly established republic against the opposition of the Catholic church still powerful in rural areas. These ‘black hussars of the republic’ had the quasi-religious mission as of ‘secular’ priests and hence a high social standing – alongside the doctor and the Catholic priest in rural society.

Secondary teachers had an important social role too. They were to disseminate French civilisation – the fruit of Enlightenment. For the rest, the teaching profession was not unattractive. Teachers on the two levels were civil servants, when they had passed their concours (entry competition, see below), they needed not fear unemployment, and they had a relatively good salary particularly in secondary education.

Today things have changed a great deal. With the rise of media society, the cultural mission of the teachers has diminished even in rural areas: the teacher no longer has a monopoly of knowledge neither in relation to pupils, nor parents. However, even under the changed conditions, the teacher has maintained certain social prerogatives: he (or she - the profession has now a majority of women, even in secondary education) is still member of the civil service (fonctionnaire). Primary teachers’ salary increased with their newly gained academic status, which compensates to a certain degree their loss of social prestige. Moreover teachers still use to have particular roles in the community. More than other professions they have leading functions in cultural or civic associations: for example theatre clubs, clubs for the protection of environment, political parties and trade unions (Thevenin/Compagnon 2005, pp. 54f.). The self-concept of teachers is to a significant extent revalued by these roles. As for primary teachers, there is a relatively stable feeling of social recognition, particularly emphasized by young professeurs des écoles (see below). This is not surprising for their status has improved. At the beginning of the 1990s secondary teachers did experience a feeling of increased social prestige concerning their profession, but this feel-

ing changed later on; in 2002 only one third of secondary teachers felt that their status was sufficiently recognized by society (French Report Working Group 2004, pp. 238f.). Therefore it is not by accident that after 1999 several official reports about the situation of teachers have been ordered by the ministry. They confirm what has been explained above (e.g. Obin 2002).

School and the role of the family

The value attributed to schools by students has its equivalent in the case of parents. The numerous parents' associations and their activities in the field of educational policy are indicators of the great importance that the latter attribute to school. This interest in educational matters is reflected in TV and print media at the beginning of the school year after the summer holidays (la rentrée), which in France is the signal for the 'rebirth' of the whole social life. As for school life, school administration communicates all innovations via the media, parents go public with all problems still present, being ready to organise local and national strikes if the conditions of learning in the schools are not satisfactory.

Since 1968 parents have been formally represented in school councils (in primary schools) or administration councils (in secondary schools). This has been affirmed in the Education Act of 1989. The parents' associations constitute an important interface between school and parents in France. They alone have the right to present voting lists for the election of parents' representatives. The elected representatives of the parents in the school councils are entitled to participate in decision-making concerning the school profile (projet d'école), the school rules, the organisation of the week (free Saturday or not) etc. In secondary schools the budget of the schools is approved in the corresponding council too.

Another level of parents' representation is the 'class council' which decides on the further (school) career of the pupils. On the regional level, in the departmental commissions of allocation of the students parents representatives help decide upon the school types in which students may continue. But parents are present, too, in consultative bodies on the national level.

As for the personal level according to a 1998 survey 90% of the parents declared that they had at least one meeting with teachers during the school year, but for most of them it was in the setting of a parent's evening, only 35% had a personal appointment with the teacher. It is striking that in most cases only the mothers hold the contact with the school and, finally, contacts are strongly linked to social background. Lower class or immigrant parents rather seldom come to the school (French Working Group 2004, p. 230).

Organizational context and governance of the current school system

Basic legal principles, levels of governance, philosophy of governance

The right of access to education and vocational training is accorded by the French Constitution of 1958. In the 1789 tradition, instruction in schools has to be without any influence of the churches (private schools excepted), schooling on all levels of the educational system is organised or at least controlled by the state. The actual key texts in school legislation are the above mentioned Education Act of 1989, replaced by the recent Education Act of 2005 whose regulations will only come into force progressively. The historic Act of 1989 published the day of the bicentenary of the French Revolution defined education as 'first national priority' (Art. 1,1). The 'national target' was to give to all young people up to the year 2000 at least a vocational qualification on the level of a qualified worker (which means the radical reduction of existing drop outs) and, as already mentioned, an enormous rise of the quota of students preparing a baccalauréat.

The traditional centralised structure of the curriculum system will be maintained (with the 'intrusion' of external experts as consultants in the development of the national curricula). On the school level the divergence to the centralist model is even clearer: individual schools will have to elaborate individual development plans (projets d'établissements - cf. Obin/Cros 1991) which allow particular profiles of the individual schools - however, it is evident that all this has to happen within the framework of the national targets.

The functioning of universities is essentially organised by a Higher Education Act dating from 1984. The fundamental legislation in the field of Further Education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) outside schools dates from 1971, actualised by an Act on Lifelong Learning of May 2004 extending the obligations of the firms to finance actions of continuing education for their staff.

The French state is highly important in its role of organising and controlling education (see below). Moreover, it has the monopoly of controlling examinations. All school exams – including firm-based vocational training – are organised by the state that awards the ‘national’ diploma. School administration has its central point still on the national level, the Ministry of National Education. All teachers are recruited and paid by the National Ministry (except assistant teachers with temporary contracts). On the regional level there are 28 regional areas of school administration, the ‘académies’. These académies coincide in the most cases with the political ‘regions’ created within the framework of ‘deconcentration policy’ in the 1980s. Similar to the political regions the significance of the académies, too, grew perceptibly over the last 20 years. On the top of each regional area of school administration, there is a Recteur d’Académie nominated by the Minister. At department level, the Recteur is represented by an inspector (Inspecteur d’Académie) who is the primary education supervisor. The pedagogical supervision of secondary teachers is in the hands of a special inspectorate (Inspection générale) that works on the national level. The municipalities do not have particular competences in the educational system – they have only the responsibility for the material infrastructure of preschools and primary schools.

The Ministry of Agriculture traditionally has its own network of secondary schools in rural areas. In 2003 this encompassed no more than 3% of secondary students. The percentage of private schools in the rural sector however is very high (about 60%).

The link between school and society is manifested in consultative bodies which are to represent stakeholder’s interests (parents’ association, representations of the social partners etc.). These bodies have to give their advice in all important questions of educational policy, though the Ministry is not obliged to follow it. Since the notable efforts made in the 1980s to de-concentrate French administration, schools have become ‘local public instructional institutions’ (établissements publics locaux d’enseignement – EPLE) (Auduc 1998, pp. 58ff.). This means that only the teachers’ salaries are in the responsibility of the central state; all material costs have to be assumed by local bodies.

The headmasters on the secondary level have a double function: On the one hand, they are representatives of the Ministry (the central state) and therefore responsible for the execution of central orders. On the other hand, they have to execute the decision of the administration council, the ‘parliament’ of the school chaired by the head. The administration council is composed in equal parts of teachers, students, parents and representatives of the school administration. It has the right to make decisions about strictly defined issues like the school budget, the school profile (projet scolaire) etc.

The school’s pedagogical autonomy resides essentially in the splitting up of the global number of teaching hours given by the school administration, the division of the students in classes and learning groups, the selection of curriculum content specific to the school profile and the definition of optional learning activities. Thus a compromise between the central structure of the national curriculum and the implementation of particular school centred curricula is attained. It is striking however, that most of these domains of ‘pedagogical autonomy’ are linked either to optional curriculum elements or to the scope given between the minima and maxima in the timetables.

Financing

Almost the totality of the French school system is financed by the public budget. In primary education the central state pays the teachers, whereas the costs of non-teaching staff – quite considerable in French system, where the school day only ends in the late afternoon – are taken in charge by the local authorities. In secondary education, the financial contribution of the local communities is diminishing. The ministry of education also covers the cost for non-teaching staff, though the local authorities have to pay for school transport.

As for the level of lycées, the functional and investment costs are in charge of the Regional Councils (Conseil régional). However, on this level, private enterprises participate in financing of technical and vocational schooling by paying an apprenticeship tax, if they do not train apprentices themselves. In private schools the state takes care of the costs of the teaching staff and an important part of their functional costs, if the private schools follow the public curricula, by signing a contract with the state authorities.

Public – Private Schooling

The great majority of French students attend public (state) schools. The proportion of private schooling in 2004 was only 13,7% in primary education, 20,3% in secondary education (RERS 2004, pp. 61 and 79). Almost all of these private (mostly Catholic) schools have a contract with state authorities which means that they follow the public curricula and they are submitted to state control. By this they have the double advantage of receiving state subsidies and having the right to take public examinations.

Historically these private schools are a concession made by the secular state to compensate for the exclusion of religious instruction from state schools. Parents ought to have the possibility of sending their children to a denominational school, giving religious instruction if they want it. Meanwhile the function of private schooling has changed. The religious element has all but disappeared, private Catholic education on the secondary level has become an opportunity in particular for less able children of the upper middle classes to prepare the baccalauréat under better conditions than in the state schools (smaller classes), a fact that gave to these schools the nickname of boîte à bachot (baccalaureate boxes). Nowadays, after the introduction of the common collège, middle class parents often consider private schools as a means to avoid public primary schools or collèges of their district situated in a ‘difficult’ area (e.g. with a high percentage of immigrants). This fact is complained by official reports on educational policy (La mixité 2002).

In any case historical reasons give rise to great regional differences in the net of private schools. So in Brittany (Bretagne) the quota of private schools attains 40%.

General standards of the school education system

On the macro-level of the curriculum system, the central structures are still almost unbroken. The curriculum content is defined for each subject in national curricula (programmes). Their implementation is supervised by a national inspectorate (Inspection générale). The elaboration of the national curricula has been (and formally still is) the task of the Inspection Générale although in the 1990s a ‘National Curriculum Board’ (Conseil National des Programmes) was appointed in order to create a broader platform for the elaboration of curriculum innovation guidelines oriented to societal needs. Thus the new curricula in the 1990 were worked out by a new type of commission in which more teachers and representatives of Higher Education participated. It was only after a long process of discussion of these curriculum drafts among the teachers that the new curricula became based upon students’ competences rather than upon curriculum content. The role of this board was strengthened in the new legislation of 2005.

Quality management

Quality monitoring traditionally is carried out by the inspectorate on the one hand, and by (anonymous) national examinations, in particular the baccalauréat giving the right of access to Higher Education, on the other hand. The written baccalauréat examinations elaborated in a very sophisticated procedure are the same for all candidates of an Académie. In the collective awareness of the French people the anonymous character of the examination is the guarantee of its objectiveness. It distinguishes not only the successful students but their schools and their teachers too. Another old mode of quality control is the school inspectorate visit during classes. The inspectors have to evaluate the quality of teaching and to make suggestions for its improvement; thus they are an important criterion as for the promotion of teachers.

The most important newer form of student evaluation is the national assessment of student performance introduced in 1990. The assessment consists of national target based tests at the beginning of each new learning cycle, if the students have reached the educational objectives of the previous cycle. These assessments are made in an alternating rhythm at the beginning of the 3rd, the 6th and the 10th grade. These assessments are not to rank the students' nor the teachers' individual performances, but to inform the teachers of the new classes about possible deficiencies, in order to enable them to attack these problems by means of more individualised and modularised teaching. In other words they are diagnostic assessments. Moreover, these evaluations have a second function. They may assess the performance of the key elements of the national educational system as a whole.

Supporting Systems

The problem of school failure (*échec scolaire*) was considered as a special challenge by all French governments, in particular, but not only, by those constituted by left wing parties. School failure very often goes together with social deprivation. In particular in the suburbs of great agglomerations like Paris, Lyon or Marseille, but in many cities of middle size too, there are social focuses – high density of immigrants and of people without work – with all signs of social anomie (vandalism, violence etc.) and with its consequences for schooling. Already in the 1980s, the French government tried to react to this situation by defining ‘priority areas of education’ (Zones d’Education Prioritaires – ZEP and Réseaux d’Education Prioritaires – REP). The guiding idea of this campaign was that the ‘School of the Republic’ must combat inequality of opportunity – *égalité* being one of the three guiding principles of the French society since 1789. Therefore the deprived zones of French suburbs – or lonely rural areas – could only be helped by positive discrimination. Measures of positive discrimination have been special funding for special pedagogical measures, special in-service training for teachers teaching in smaller classes, mounting projects, opening their classrooms to the neighbourhood etc. For the official reports about these measures, the ZEP are rather successful, in the sense that they prevent social desegregation and still more school failing in these areas. In many ‘burning points’ (critical locations) the special pedagogical measures served to re-motivate young people to attend school and to get taste for learning (e.g. Education et Formations 2001, in particular Chaveau 2001).

A remaining problem, made evident during the campaign of the ZEP, was how to resolve the problem of the special needs of immigrant children. In the ZEP areas the percentage of immigrants is on average about 20%, but it may increase up to 67%. Some critiques of educational policy in France point out that the school system considers immigrant children rather a problem than a chance for cultural enrichment. Given that two of the most important languages of immigrants in France are Arabic and Portuguese it would be good to introduce these languages as second languages in ZEP’s with a high quota of immigrants – not only in order to show that they are very important languages in the actual world, but also that they have made very important contributions to the world culture.

But also in ‘normal’ areas, the French school system has a variety of measures for supporting pupils with low performance or learning difficulties. Traditionally, repeating a class is extremely frequent for underachievers. There is no special social discrimination associated with this, at least not in secondary education. The statistics of students finishing secondary education indicates that French students theoretically have 12 years for the attainment of the baccalaureate, but in reality two thirds of all students repeat at least one class during their primary or secondary education before arriving in the *classe terminale* (Dix-huit questions 2003, p. 26).

But from the beginning, French primary education has a certain number of special support measures in order to help pupils whose school success is problematic. These support systems are evidently for immigrants too. Mostly there are classes with a reduced number of pupils, serving to link weaker achievers to normal classes by using adequate pedagogical methods (measures of differentiation). Even if these classes are not especially created for immigrant children, these are clearly over represented at twice the quota they come up to in the whole population. Especially for immigrant pupils, special ‘Initiation Classes’ may be created on the primary level, ‘Introductory Classes’ in the *collège*.

In lower secondary education since the end of the 1990s ‘differentiated learning ways’ (parcours différenciés) have been initiated to overcome the problem of heterogeneous classes. This means that teachers are free to adapt their own curriculum to the learning abilities of the individual students, including special support actions for the weakest (Derouet 2003, pp. 133ff.).

The current school system

General structure

Since 1975 France has had a horizontally structured education system beginning with non-compulsory but almost inclusive preschool education for children from 2 to 6 years of age functionally linked with a five-grade elementary school. All pupils then follow a non-selective lower secondary school followed by a differentiated upper secondary level including academic, technical-academic and technical-vocational tracks. It is only on this level that the common curriculum is differentiated according to the desired diploma. Higher Education has a tripartite hierarchical system with post-secondary non-academic institutions like the Sections de Techniciens Supérieurs and the Instituts Universitaires de Technologie on the lower level, the (classical) universities in the middle and the highly selective Grandes Ecoles at the top.

Pre-primary education

Preschool education is offered free of charge for all children from 2 to 6 years as a part of the regular school system. Even if it is not compulsory – compulsory schooling begins at the age of 6 and goes up to 16 – almost all children from 3 to 6 years and 40% of all children between 2 and 3 years attend the école maternelle. As with all types of schooling in France, preschool education too goes from the early morning to the late afternoon (including lunch if wanted). The inclusive character of this educational policy is an efficient measure to promote social and family policy: indeed France combines a high rate of working women and a high birth rate for which it ranks second in the European Union (behind Ireland). Pre-school education in France therefore has a triple aim: supporting child development, preparing for compulsory schooling and relieving parents. An obstacle to greater pedagogical success is the high number of pupils in a group (still more than 25 children). The teachers in the école maternelle have the same status and the same type of teacher training as the primary teachers. As in the 1990s a common teacher training structure was introduced including the same title for all teachers (‘professeur’), educators in preschool education in France may be called professeurs des écoles maternelles.

Inclusive schooling of all children between 3 and 6 years reinforces the functional link between pre-school and primary education in France. However, for a long time, the transition between école maternelle and primary education has been paradoxically a critical issue in the French education system. Pedagogical concepts from the new education movement were used to bridge the gap: opening of schools to their environment and implementing ‘active’ teaching methods stressing pupils’ independent learning. These pedagogical measures seemed to be effective in lowering the high rate of pupils already repeating classes even in primary education. The quota of pupils having repeated at least one class at the end of primary school has decreased from 25.4% in 1990 to 19.5% in 2000 (latest data available, RRS 2004, p. 65).

The pedagogical innovation of pre-primary and primary education was accompanied in the beginning of the 1990s by a new structure. Pre-primary and primary education were considered as a whole to be divided in three phases of three years each. This was supposed to demonstrate the unity of the two school forms. However, this was only possible if pre-primary education began already at the age of two. Thus, the first three years of the maternelle constitute their own learning cycle (cycle des apprentissages premiers). The last year of pre-primary education and the first two years of the primary school build a bridge between the two institutions in the sense that together they constitute the ‘cycle of fundamental learning’ (cycle des apprentissages fondamentaux). In other words, officially, fundamental learning in France already begins in the last year of preschool education. The third cycle comprises the forms three to five (cycle des approfondissements). It is evident that the three cycles, including the whole period of

pre-primary and primary education, have to integrate both, the functional and the structural links between the two institutional forms of education.

Primary education

The main task of primary education is giving literacy. In this field the main problem is still the relatively high number of functional illiterates at the end of primary education; it is only slowly decreasing. Therefore the main curricular topics in this field are mother tongue education (9 hours per week in the two cycles); mathematical literacy has however only 5 hours. Elements of scientific and social problems are put together in a new discipline ‘discovering the world – civic education’ which has four hours per week. In the third cycle, in order to make the transition to secondary education easier, the traditional names of the disciplines (physics, history, geography) are re-established. The principle of subject-centred instruction – the main didactic form of secondary education – is being thus prepared. Further subjects in the third cycle are sports and fine arts having together 5 1/2 hours per week. Two hours per week are reserved for support measures following the teachers’ diagnosis. Together with the new learning cycles national assessments of the pupils’ learning outcomes have been introduced.

Lower secondary education

Lower secondary education in France has its place in the common collège which has four grades with a common curriculum for all students. There is a certain paradox in French school legislation. School is compulsory from 6 to 16 years (ten years). However the compulsory school types, primary school and lower secondary school together normally last only 9 years. Implicitly, school administration assumes that those pupils who do not continue their education in upper secondary education (rather a minority) repeat a class at least once during their compulsory school career.

When the common secondary education was introduced in 1975 no differentiation at all was foreseen; the only possibility of differentiation was a contingent of three hours of additional teaching for under-achievers in French and in Mathematics. However, in the French collège, there was from beginning a hidden form of differentiation: the choice between English, Spanish and German as a first foreign language. However, German is considered to be difficult for beginners to learn having a complex morphology (like Latin). Therefore German as a first language is chosen mainly by performance-oriented parents of the upper middle class. As the school classes are very often constituted according to the foreign language chosen, the children of socially advantaged families with a high school performance often come together in these classes. Thus, the choice of the first foreign language becomes a hidden mechanism of social selection in which German takes over the function formerly assumed by Latin.

Until the 1990s, after grade 8 the weaker pupils had the opportunity to get out of the normal tracks of the common secondary education system and to begin special classes preparing for Vocational Education and Training (VET) which were already a part of the system of Vocational and Technical Education. As these structures evidently seemed to contradict the spirit of the common collèges the left wing government created another form of differentiation: the ‘technological classes’ within the collège. These classes had a curriculum with much more practical topics, to be done as technical projects rather than through traditional instruction. The aim of these measures was to create positive learning experiences in order to finish lower secondary education successfully. As a matter of fact, the lower secondary education diploma was the first means of raising the number of upper secondary education diplomas (as mentioned before, since the 1980s it was the main aim of French educational policy to raise the participation rate in the final year of upper secondary education (preparing the baccalauréat, see below) to 80% of the age cohort).

Although French educational policy closely approached its quantitative target of increasing the number of full lower secondary diplomas, the question how to cater for a heterogeneous pupil population was not yet answered. In the midst of the 1990s new reform ideas were tried. The four collège classes were divided in three cycles. The first class, the collège entrance was structured in an ‘adaptation cycle’ in order to smooth the transition between primary and secondary education. The following two classes (7

and 8) had no special function, they were the 'central cycle', but the last class (class 9) of the collège was given the function of serving as 'orientation cycle' in which almost all students made decisions about their future educational plans.

The change of name was a signal for further curricular changes, all aiming at a solution of the differentiation problem. By giving more flexibility to individual school's time table, they could better adapt it to the individual projet d'établissement (the special profile of the school). Special support could be given to underachieving students in order to compensate for their lacks, either within heterogeneous classes or in special 'consolidation groups' according to each school's needs and predilections. In any case, the 'pedagogical team' organising these measures of consolidation is to work on a volunteer basis (not by order of the headmaster), if the action should be successful.

By so-called supervised individual tasks the students are to become acquainted with the special work methods of secondary education (i.e. self controlled work). The logic of these forms of differentiation – more internal differentiation than differentiation by homogeneous learning groups – finds its continuation in the subsequent classes. For all subjects a range between minimal and maximal time tables are given – the schools may choose following their needs. The students may have 'diversified personal curricula', which means that the students at the end of the cycle may have reached the same learning targets in different ways. By these individual detours the students' special competences are to be manifested. Each school is to define the differentiated curricula for the students concerned. For those students who have major learning difficulties, special support lessons – not more than six hours per week – may be offered. This may concern those students who do not master sufficiently the basic techniques (the three 'r's': reading, writing, arithmetic) necessary to be successful in learning. In order to diagnose these cases intensified cooperation between primary and secondary teachers is recommended.

Upper secondary education

The main structural characteristic of the of upper secondary academic tracks is an increasing profiling into general academic and technical academic education ending in a general or technical baccalaureate which gives, independently of the profile, the right to enter Higher Education without any restrictions. In order to avoid the problems of early specialisation, a reform of upper secondary education began in the early 1990s to keep open as long as possible the choice of the baccalaureate track. Therefore grade 10 is still without any profile (seconde de détermination). There is no separation between general and technical tracks. As its French name suggests in this form progressively the student's further profile in the educational system is to be fixed. In fact at the end of grade 10, there is an orientation procedure, students have to choose the general or technical baccalaureate track and within these two tracks, their special profile. In case of missing achievement targets in grade 10, they are 'reoriented' to vocational schools or apprenticeship.

Another important objective of this reform was to abolish the 'imperialism of Mathematics' as a means of stratifying general upper secondary education. Until this reform, the social prestige of upper secondary profiles has been dependent on the weight of mathematics taught there. The number of profiles was reduced to three in the academic track:

- L: languages and literature
- S: sciences
- ES: economic and social topics.

Thus the reform essentially reduced the former three scientific profiles (physics, biology and technology) into one integrated profile.

Whereas before, the choice of profile determined the whole curriculum without major modifications, the students now have the opportunity to choose, besides the core curriculum of a profile, within a range of courses offered, a personal curriculum integrating for instance more mathematics in a non-scientific profile or more foreign languages in the scientific profile.

By this optional system, the rather rigid 'sections' of upper secondary education were to be smoothed and transformed in individual profiles. Within the technological track, the pan of profiles was reduced

too. There are no more than four sections offered in the fields of industrial arts, biological and medical technologies and technology of services and administration. In the last mentioned ‘tertiary’ section the overwhelming majority of the students are girls, which has the result that in sum, female students constitute more than 50% of all technological profiles .

Vocational education and training (VET)

Besides the technical track for a baccalaureate, the French education system has two other forms of VET: vocational upper secondary education (second cycle professionnel) in vocational colleges (lycées professionnels) and apprenticeship in a firm with additional courses in schools similar to the German dual system. Over two or three years both tracks prepare a diploma as a qualified worker or employee. Apprenticeship traditionally does not have a high prestige in French society. Only 28% of all VET participants on this level are apprentices (10% of the corresponding age group - RERS 2004, pp. 135ff.).

With a qualified worker/employee diploma, young people can continue their vocational education for two years to prepare a baccalauréat professionnel. This diploma confers all prerogatives of the general or technical baccalaureate (access to higher education); however, most graduates either take jobs in industry or continue their studies in non-academic post-secondary education. The creation of the baccalauréat professionnel was an important means of increasing the bacheliers quota as planned by educational policy.

As a matter of fact, there is a clear trend towards higher level diplomas to the disadvantage of the qualified workers diploma. Between 1990 and 2002 the numbers of qualified workers’ diplomas decreased from 443,000 to 364,000 per year, whereas the number of diplomas on the next higher level (baccalauréat) increased from 148,000 to 237,000 (RERS 2004, p. 209).

Special education

For physically and mentally handicapped children and children with special learning problems and special educational needs there are various possibilities: they may be integrated in ‘normal’ classes, they may constitute special classes or even sections in ‘normal’ schools, but they may also be concentrated in their own ‘special school’ system (enseignement spécialisé). In the midst of the 1990 1.3% of all children on the primary level frequented a special education school. A certain number of these schools work under the auspices of the Ministry of Health. Among the special education sections integrated in the collège, there are the ‘sections’ for adapted general and vocational learning. The main objective of this adapted learning is to make the children able to master simple handicrafts jobs. Most of these children come from special sections in primary education.

Postsecondary and tertiary education

The organisation of postsecondary education has particular forms in France. We can reduce it to a tripartite system.

- 1) Outside the Higher Education institutions in a strict sense – that is on an tertiary level – there is a two-year course offered in technical lycées giving the opportunity to successful bacheliers to prepare a Higher Technician diploma (Brevet de Technicien Supérieur – BTS). This course is increasingly chosen by the holders of the baccalauréat professionnel. In the 1960 this course was to be replaced by a new equivalent diploma the Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie prepared in University institutes (Institut Universitaire de Technologie), however, the social demand for the BTS – considered as closer to the practical needs of the economy – was too strong. Both courses – in school and in university – exist side by side: in 2004 the number of students preparing a BTS double that of the students in IUT (RERS 2004, pp. 162 and 170).

- 2) The 'classical' university is open for all holders of a baccalauréat, whatever the type might be. There is no entrance selection, but the selection becomes relevant in the course of the study (after the first year). The traditional structure of the studies in Humanities and Sciences (DEUG – Diplôme d'Etudes Universitaires Générales after two years, Licence after three years, Maîtrise after four years of studies) is going to be replaced by the 'LMD-structure". This abbreviation, standing for Licence (=Bachelor) after three years, (Master) after five years and giving the right to prepare a Doctorat (doctoral studies) is the French version of the Bologna-Process. It may be surprising that France was one of the first and fiercest promoters of the new European (or rather global) system of higher education.
- 3) The most distinguishing characteristic of French higher education is the system of elite institution – the Grandes Ecoles. There is no direct access to these institutions but the entry is by competition (concours). This means that only a small number of places is opened to the best candidates. The examination (concours) giving the basis of a ranking list must be prepared in a two year post-secondary course given in some well known lycées in subjects relevant for the future studies.

In order to be admitted in these classes préparatoires students must have an excellent baccalaureate. Every year about 10% of the bacheliers try this way. Those students who did not have the chance of succeeding in one of the concours may ask for the equivalence of the first two years of university studies (DEUG).

In this manner (by concours), not only the great internationally renowned institutions of French Higher Education like Ecole Normale Supérieure, Ecole Polytechnique or Ecole de Hautes Etudes Commerciales (HEC) recruit their students, but also most of the institutions training engineers. Students often do several competitions at the same time in order to multiply their chances.

Having succeeded in the concours of one of the Grandes Ecoles, the student has many advantages compared to university students: a low staff-student ratio, a generous scholarship and the assurance of belonging to a social network that guarantees an interesting post in the management in economy or administration.

This system has been very often criticized for its socially selective character and the lack of reliability of the selection criteria: as a matter of fact, the performance gap between the last candidate admitted and the first who has failed may be extremely small (a tenth of a point). In spite of all these critiques, the Grandes Ecoles have resisted all attempts at reform. However, they will have to change the recruitment into the Bologna-Structures.

Teacher education and training

Teacher education in France for a long time followed the structure of the school system: Education and training for primary teachers was given in teacher training at the end of grade 9, the end of the former upper primary cycle (école primaire supérieure). The teacher trainees received a complement of general education (culture générale) and an integrated training combining courses in psycho-pedagogy and practical training. With the primary teacher diploma, they got the equivalence of the baccalaureate and by this the best performing young primary teachers had the possibility to go on to higher education.

Secondary teachers followed at least a four year higher education course (licence + preparation of the concours) of academic studies in a special subject (or a compulsory combination of subjects like physics and chemistry) in order to enter a special competition (concours) giving access to practical training. The competition was highly selective, the selection criteria were exclusively of an academic nature. At the end of the practical year the successful candidates got the CAPES/CAPET (Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement Secondaire/ Technique) and by this, tenure in secondary education.

A particular feature of French teacher education is the category of the professeur agrégé in secondary education. The agrégés are recruited in another special competition (concours) after 5 years of academic studies. They are not obliged to follow practical training (they often pass directly to higher education) and they have a lot of advantages compared with 'normal' secondary teachers (with CAPES): fewer hours to teach, higher salary and the right to teach in the preparatory classes for the grandes écoles.

In the 1980s, there was a progressive ‘academisation’ of primary teacher education that culminated in the creation of new institutions, the IUFM (Institut Universitaires de Formation des Maîtres) which gave a common setting for education and training of all categories of teachers. This meant, above all, an academic upgrading of primary teachers who hence had to follow a three year course at university before being admitted into the IUFM in order to prepare their respective concours. The year of practical training for all teacher categories is transferred to the IUFM.

In other words, education and training of the primary teachers is shaped according to the model of the secondary teachers. They get the prestigious title of ‘professeur (des écoles)’, even if they work in pre-school institutions, and more important, their salary is harmonised with that of secondary teachers.

Current Problems, discussion and perspectives of development

When in the crucial year 2000 the quota of students getting the baccalauréat was not more than 62%, and the proportion of students in the last grade was about 75%, with a certain disillusionment it became evident that the aim of the ‘80%’ was not reached, although the failure was not very great. In fact, in the second part of the 1990s after a long period of increasing numbers, the quota of bacheliers stagnated. The policy of expanding upper secondary education by increasing the number of bacheliers came to an end before having attained its objective completely. One of the possible reasons for this (relative) failure was the fact that it has become more and more difficult to increase the number of students who finished the collège successfully, as this form of inclusive schooling came to its limits. Thus, one key to the democratisation of the French school system seems to be the issue of integrative lower secondary education and in particular, the handling of the heterogeneous population of its students.

Therefore, in the actual discussions about French school we may distinguish three main topics:

- the problem of better handling of the heterogeneous population of school students (how to organise the college?);
- the issue of the strict secular character of the school apparently threatened by Islamic school girls wearing the headscarf as a sign of their religious faith;
- the reform of higher education and its repercussion on teacher training.

Some of these problems are the topics of new education acts promulgated in 2004 and 2005.

The issue of the islamic headscarf

The problem of the ‘Islamic headscarf’ (le foulard islamique) appeared for the first time, when a school headmaster in 1989 forbid three North-African girls to wear the headscarf within the school area, as he judged that this headscarf was an external sign of religious convictions and therefore in contradiction with the secular, neutral character of the school. This measure provoked a great discussion about the open and tolerant society and violent controversies. The debate was particularly intense as the feminist point of view considered the headscarf as a symbol of the women’s oppressed status, intolerable in an egalitarian society. Finally, by the High Court recommendation, the minister referred the decision to the school council of the individual school: it was the school council that had to decide whether the wearing of the headscarf in the school building was to be allowed or not.

However, the quarrel was not over by this measure. As other incidents followed where pupil were prevented by their Islamic parents from participating in certain subjects, the school system finished by not tolerating these signs of segregation of certain communities. Since 2004 by a special law, the bearing of the Islamic headscarf is formally forbidden within the school area, as it is considered as an ostensible sign of religious affiliation.

The new Education Act

In spring 2005, after very long public preparation a new Education Act replaced that of 1989. In the mind of its promoters the new act was necessary, after 16 years, as many things had changed in the French social system since the act of 1989. According to the slogan ‘more justice, more efficiency, more openness’ the act presented three main axes of action. The future school curriculum should define a common basic knowledge and basic competencies, formulated in an operationalized form and controlled by national assessments in the 3rd and the 6th years of compulsory schooling. These assessments would serve as feed back on the students’ acquired competences during their schooling in order to give the opportunity of improving them (a sort of formative evaluation). A new national examination at the end of compulsory education (the actual *brevet des college* served as a summative measure of achievement.

Together with the new legislation new methods of curriculum development were established, giving more competence to the National Curriculum Council (*Conseil National des Programmes*) and reducing the power of the inspectorate in this matter. Early attempts to do so already in the 1970s had failed (Hörner 1979). By this enlargement of the social basis of curriculum development associating other social groups with this process the social relevance of the defined basis competencies should be stressed.

To the ‘efficiency line’ of the new legislation we may count a new practical regulation for class-room organisation: the replacement of absent teachers (until now in the hand of the regional school administration) is henceforth given to the individual school. The headmaster has to make his own staff to do the job for missing colleagues with a small budget in order to pay for supply teaching. This increased autonomy of the individual school should simplify the organisation, but the measure has been vividly criticized because the replacement teachers are not necessarily subject specialists in the same discipline.

As for the aim of social justice, according to the law, ‘equality of opportunity’ is to be enhanced by the introduction of personal learning programs as special support systems. An improved scholarship system in particular for socially deprived students on the basis of good school performance should ensure the material side of equality of opportunity.

‘Openness’ aims in two directions: the world of work on the one hand, and the world outside the national borders on the other hand. The first aim should be approached by the upgrading of vocational education and training in society. For this, the new education act creates a new school type, the ‘college of professions’ (*lycée des metiers*) which should include different VET levels from basic to higher vocational training and which should hold particular partnership with industry. Not only these ‘links with industry’ but also the introduction of a systematic career education (*enseignement de la découverte professionnelle*) should serve to a better insertion of young people in the labour market.

The window to the world should be opened by enhanced foreign language teaching during compulsory education. The first foreign language will henceforth begin already in grade 3 of the primary school, the second language in grade 7 (the second year of college). In order to improve the quality of language education, foreign language lessons are given in smaller groups (50% of the class).

Higher education and teacher training

It is evident that the early beginning of language teaching has implications for the training of primary teachers. In the future, primary school teachers will have to pass a compulsory examination in language education. On the whole, all these aims and measures to improve schools will have direct repercussions on teacher training in general within all three domains discussed above. In order to improve the academic standard of teacher education, a closer integration of IUFM into the universities is planned. They will become like ‘schools of education’ within the universities being responsible for the whole process of teacher education which will have the opportunity to be linked to the new Master’s degree. But also the pedagogical content of teacher education is to be improved. The new legislation requires teachers to learn a better handling of heterogeneous classes. In the same context they will receive an initiation in religious knowledge in order to understand better the reaction of their Islamic students.

In sum, as far as teacher education is concerned, the new Education Act aims at a more professional teaching force.

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