Basic education and post-high school training in France

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ABSTRACT In light of the theme of literacy, this paper focuses on the educational system in France. The aim is to highlight how the system dissociates transmission of basic knowledge from the development of employability. Therefore, following the major trend, in the academic trajectory, graduation comes first and preoccupations for professional certification only appear later, sometimes as a solution to failure and drop-outs. Even though efforts have been made to build a continuum between initial training and continuous training (lifelong training), graduation is usually considered as a prerequisite to the development of employability. As a consequence, dealing with literacy in France essentially falls under the competence of social affairs services. This explains why the operators in the domain of literacy are mostly associations. Thus, volunteers make up an important segment of the practitioners. Almost all these volunteers have had no training in teaching (pedagogy/andragogy).

Keywords: Young people learning, illiteracy, competence, training, curriculum

Introduction

Public authorities are becoming increasingly interested in international comparative analyses on education, in so far as they make it possible to identify efficient educational policies that may contribute to improving individuals' economic and social perspectives, promote an efficient management of the educational systems, and mobilise extra resources in order to meet ever increasing needs. As for public opinion, is the public are also keen to know whether or not the country's educational institutions succeed in training pupils and students of international rank.

In that sense, most indicators often aim first at broaching issues on education and lifelong training, which stand among the countries' political priorities and whose comparative study, in an international perspective, can usefully complete the analyses and assessments that have been made on a national scale. Their aim is, as much as possible, to meet international comparisons, while highlighting national specificities, so that, in their strategic orientations, historical, systematic and cultural differences between the various countries can be taken into account.

Fifty years of progress in the world of education

One must note that, in the most developed countries, access to education has significantly increased .The majority of the population of the OECD countries have access to long-term studies beyond compulsory schooling. Parallel to this, countries have evolved in their mode of apprehending the results of education, since, instead of adopting a purely quantitative perspective limited to measuring the investment and the participation to education, as was the case in the past, they now acknowledge the importance of the quality of the skills the students should have acquired at the end of their studies (cf. PISA 2009); such is also the case in countries where basic education clearly has inferior levels of development**.**

In the early sixties (1960/61), going into higher education was a privilege limited to a happy few, and even secondary high school was inaccessible to a majority of young people in many countries. In 2014, a large majority of the population received high school teaching and the proportion of higher education graduates is one adult out of three; in some countries, this proportion could soon very well concern half of the population.

What is the European Union's position?

The European Union's (EU) work programme for education and training, adopted by the EU Council in May 2009, is aimed at reinforcing political cooperation within the EU, the objectives of which had been fixed f the year 2010:
- The proportion of young people aged 15 without a sufficient mastery of reading was to drop to less than20 %;
- The average proportion of young people prematurely leaving school was not to exceed 10 %;

- 85 % of young people aged 22 were to complete their senior high-school years;
- The total number of diplomas in Mathematics, Sciences and Technology was to increase by at least 15%, while the balance between boys and girls in those disciplines was to increase;
- The average rate of people aged 25-64 participating in educational and lifelong training activities was to reach at least 12,5%.

By 2020, new challenges must be met, the objectives of which are as follows:
- At least 95% of children between 4 and the age of compulsory education should take part in pre-school education;
- The proportion of people aged 15 without a sufficient mastery of reading, Mathematics and Sciences should drop to below15%;
- The proportion of young people prematurely leaving school and training should be less than 10 %;
- The proportion of higher education graduates aged 30-34 should be at least 40%;
- At least 15% of people aged 25-64 should take part in educational and lifelong training activities.

Some elements of analysis of the French educational system

Since the oil crises of the seventies (1970), all parents seem to have become, without being fully aware of it, adepts of the theory of the human capital. Now, in the French context, whatever their social background, they know by experience that a diploma is not only important in terms of the labour market, but also that academic failure leads to dead ends, since certain early orientations appear to them as relegation paths. Without denying the fact that school trains students in culture and citizenship, they assert that it properly prepares one for the labour market, thus expressing their aspiration for their children's professional integration.

Paradoxically, the Republican elitism of the French school system - its culture of ranking and early elimination, its tolerance of inequalities and their reproduction in spite of democratisation policies undertaken in the last decades - the French school system has remained extremely selective. In this early21st century, doesn't this system remain hostage to the ideas present at its birth in the late 19th century, by distinguishing small elite without any concern for a significant raise of the others' level?

In France, the school system has a very high rate of young people who fail academically and, at the same time, the system cannot manage to provide sufficiently prepared elites to meet the needs of the new economic necessities. Reflecting society, a society that sees itself as fairer and more egalitarian than many others, it has, however, remained elitist and non-egalitarian. Therefore, one is led to believe that the elite is good, innovating and abundant if the masses are trained for the least possible academic failure. In France, as it is, the academic level has risen and the gaps have lessened in the access to the top, even if the risk of initial failures is still too important for an economy expecting more and more elaborate skills. (cf. PISA 2009).

While the French school system is famous for being one of the best in the world - which is true for a small majority of its students - it is, in fact, the worst for the remaining students. The gap between the two is significant, since almost 60% reach international excellence, whereas 40% are at the bottom of the ladder for performance.

Expected skills in French elementary schools

At the end of the last year of nursery school, children are supposed to be able to express themselves, to listen and speak, to understand a narrative and to make a distinction between the various sonorities of the language, as well as between the graphical signs representing them in a written text. Then, during the year preparatory to elementary school, learning how to read goes through decoding and identifying words, but also through the progressive acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary to understand a text. The children work on deciphering and writing words they already know. Articulating reading and writing is absolutely necessary in this learning and, progressively, leads children to read more easily and quickly (deciphering, identification of a meaning). The pupils also progressively learn how to master the movements of cursive script: writing by respecting the spelling, the links between letters, the accents, the spaces between words, the punctuation signs and capital letters. Then, in the first year of elementary school, they are faced with longer and more varied texts with more complex sentences. However, being able to decipher and recognise the meaning of words is not enough to be able to read a sentence or a text; the pupils also learn how to rely on the organisation of a sentence or a text. They acquire the necessary vocabulary and knowledge to understand the texts they are given to read.

As for learning how to read and write, the appropriation and understanding of words, of sentences and of texts progress at the same time and are mutually reinforced during the cycle. They are supported by the oral practice of the language and the acquisition of vocabulary, jointly accompanied by a first initiation to grammar and spelling. The objective is to teach pupils how to write a short text by themselves: gathering and organising ideas, choosing the proper vocabulary, building and linking sentences and paying attention to spelling. Moreover, they are taught the use of a computer: writing on a keyboard and using an e-dictionary.

Academic failure and inequalities

In three of the fields deemed important in a school curriculum, one fourth of French young people aged 15 are in a situation of significant failure, even though, in the eighties (1980), the political authorities aimed at promoting 80% of the same age group up to the Baccalauréat (High School graduation).

French debates on education often show the interests of the masses and those of the elite as a contradiction. Those who defend further measures for the democratisation of the school system are often accused of sacrificing excellence to mediocrity. Conversely, those who defend the necessity of improving the elite are generally suspected of abandoning the greater number of pupils to their fate and of encouraging a new academic aristocracy.

According to the PISA 2009 assessments, it seems that French programmes mostly function for the elite, since the 'best pupils' group has slightly increased (from 8,5 % to 9,6 % in reading), whereas that group has rather decreased in the rest of the OECD countries. On the whole, the difficulties in learning appear overwhelmingly among children from families in precarious situations. Concerning this, in the OECD countries, immigrant pupils of the first generation, have scores lower by 52 points on average than native pupils (a gap of 79 points in France), a gap representing the equivalent of more than a year's studies.

As for the implementation of the assessment processes of the effects of education, the various components of social inequalities at school are taken into account: the parents' jobs, the mother's and the father's diplomas, indicator of family wealth, family cultural heritage, educational resources at home, etc..The constellation of the elements composing what, since Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1964), sociologists have been calling the "cultural capital" is clearly differentiated from the traditional components (parental diplomas, conversations at home, books of classical literature, poetry, dictionaries, works of art…), but also contemporary tools, such as access to computers and the Internet, the resort to educational software, DVD players, etc. On an international scale, there are countries where the initial inequalities are fewer than in others. A school system is efficient when it makes it possible for the greater majority of pupils to assimilate, in due time, the knowledge they are being taught, and to mobilise it correctly in life.The PISA (2009) results highlight very strong variations in the achievement of this objective between countries with equivalent economic levels. The school systems are gauged according to their fundamental values, social justice and efficiency, which are universal values, independent from the very different forms of organisations characterising each country.

PISA measures competences or abilities deemed necessary to lead an autonomous adult life. The PISA (2009) study aims not only at evaluating the ability of children to reproduce what they have learnt, but also at determining to what extent they are capable of extrapolating from what they know and of using their knowledge in familiar or uncommon situations and in contexts related or not to school. Thus, the key is not to check whether or not the pupils have learnt their lessons well, but whether they can benefit from them in order to get along in life: understanding the world, building their personal development and fully participating in social life. This echoes the fundamental finalities school assigns in every country: training autonomous citizens who are capable of exploiting the capital of competences and knowledge acquired at school, in their professional and every day adult life.

Literacy problems and training level of the adult population

Illiteracy points to the situation of somebody who has benefitted from a certain learning, yet who has not acquired, or has lost, the mastery of reading and writing, because this learning was too fragile, and who does not have the basic skills to be autonomous in the simple circumstances of everyday life, and is therefore particularly exposed to the risk of social exclusion.

Though it is often invisible, illiteracy is a reality present everywhere. In 2013, 2.5 million people were illiterate, i.e. 7 % of the 18-65 population who have attended school in France (INSEE, "Information and everyday life" study). According to the assessments led within the framework of the "Defence and Citizenship" Day, 80.3% of French young people aged 17 are efficient readers, while 10.4 % are poor readers, and a further 4.8 % have great difficulties in reading. While illiteracy is, properly speaking, a post-school phenomenon, the difficulties that the pupils meet very early on may be forewarning signs. It is therefore necessary to prevent illiteracy from nursery school and all along compulsory school, by offering the proper answers to the factors of vulnerability.

In most countries, the number of higher education graduates among people aged 25-34 is higher than among the people aged 55-64, i.e. the generation about to retire. In OECD countries, the average proportion of people with a degree equal or superior to senior high school level among those aged 25-34 is over 20 points of percentage to the proportion of those aged 55-64. Thus, whereas the present day percentages of higher education graduates remain stable among the 25-34, the number of higher education graduates in the global population (25-64) will keep rising compared to the average figures of the OECD in Korea, France, Ireland and Japan, whereas it will keep dropping under the average figures of the OECD in Germany, Austria and Brazil.

The level of training is often used as an indicator of "human capital", i.e. of the level of competence of the population and the labour force. After the decline of manual work and the elementary intellectual tasks that can be computerised, there is now a tendency for a greater demand of competences in complex communication and analytical reasoning, thus excluding those who master neither reading nor writing.

Thus, being confronted with future uncertainties, people facing illiteracy are led to picture themselves as a constant back and forth between the production of knowledge, its usefulness and usage, thus echoing an organisational intention (Wittorski, 2009) of a reflexive movement of the subjects concerned. How does social usage, therefore, orient the production of knowledge? And how does the production of knowledge make the articulation between scientific usefulness and the social and professional usage of knowledge possible? Finally, aren't the subjects concerned forced to find alternative solutions? Don't they elaborate ways of overcoming difficulties in order to reach the objectives they have fixed?

If all individuals facing illiteracy try to optimise their production of knowledge by orienting it towards an articulation between academic usefulness and the social and professional, it is most likely because they wish to conciliate their professional and academic aspirations. This should, in the future, allow the recognition of their competences, with the representations they have of themselves, of their life stories, of the demands of the accreditation institution, and of the relationships they have with their environment, because "*individuals can fully identify to themselves only in so far as their specificities find approbation and support in relationships of social interaction*" (Honneth, 2008: 33). Thus, individualisation and an increase in integration are present in the sense that these elements condition their power of action.

Thus, people facing illiteracy could very well be torn between "empirical knowledge" and "academic knowledge", respectively echoing specific and general knowledge;

and this, in as much as *"an individual's training must act on the two registers of individuality and universality, autonomy and responsibility"* (Mialaret, 2004 : 175). They are caught in a mirror effect and led, for the interpretation of the meaning of their actions, to confront both forms of knowledge to enrich them mutually. Finally, as it is, while these people are implicitly able to express a form of intellectual pleasure without ever being disconnected from reality, they explicitly estimate that a know-how is tacitly or explicitly an investment of knowledge in situ.

Conclusion

While the PISA (2009) studies tend to show that the surest way to obtain numerous and high performing elites consists in laying all the efforts on mass school, it is necessary, however, to note that, in society, a school does not constitute an autonomous item whose efficiency merely depends on its teachers' know-how and commitment, on the pupils' obedience, on the intelligence of the programmes and the tests on the way they are assimilated, on the framing rates, or on the modernity of the environment.

Students, children and adults, all attempt to understand the social processes which go beyond the visible outlines of the specificities of the contexts and devices that organise their professional and social lives. Like researchers, people facing illiteracy seem to refer to the relevance of knowledge in as much as what is at stake is *"their ability to articulate an increasing number of actors in more and more widespread associations"* (Latour, 1995 : 32). Isn't it necessary to note that the rounding strategies that people facing illiteracy elaborate lead them to find support in the identification of a plurality of economic, social and political actors around them, and that two levels of interpretation emerge: the macro-sociological level, where they can ask questions on the types of political and economic governance, labour, training and accreditation organisations, trade-unions, and the relationships between them; and the micro-sociological level, where interactions express themselves between individual and institutional actors - interactions relative to social constructions originated in cultural norms and territorial specificities?

Some authors see in chaos unifying and *"therapeutic"* virtues in as much as they tend to generate a strong cohesion and make social inequalities and discriminations disappear (Fritz, 1961). For others, on the contrary, when the conditions of survival are stabilised, social inequalities and structures find their stand again (Dynes, Barton, 1970). That is probably why a collective mobilisation in order to uproot illiteracy appears as a step within any educational situation, however deteriorated.

Finally, the country's level of wealth, the social composition of its population, the regime of economic and social inequalities, along with the space given to the educational system in society, all appear as traits whose combination contributes to build up the specific identity of each educational system, a more or less distorted mirror of the society producing it.

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NOTES

1. Professor in Science of Education – Paris Est Créteil University - InterdisciplinaryLaboratory
of Researchon EducationalPractices andSocial Practices – Welcome Team 7313
2. The legislationon continuing educationoffers a wideattention to the issueofliteracy.

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