

(Published in: K. N. Reddy (Ed.), *Public an Private Education : An International Perspective*, India: Academic service of Hyderabad, 1994, 152-163)

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## **State and Private Education in France : School Careers and Pupils' Results**

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# State and Private Education in France : School Careers and Pupils' Results <sup>1</sup>

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In France, the presence of two parallel systems of schooling still generates a climate of competition bringing about high-pitched movements of crisis, the last of which (in 1984) remains ever present in the minds of all concerned. At that moment in time, the advocates of the private school overwhelmingly showed their determination and desire to preserve this double-tier system. By means of impressive street demonstrations, they undoubtedly mobilised forces far beyond their own “ school clientele ” <sup>2</sup>. Thus, they received active help and support from a section of the population which, although not intimately involved right then, felt they could possibly be affected at some time in the future. Therefore, the right to a private sector was defended even if a certain part of those present did not actually use it. The sociologist cannot but be involved in this issue of the respective functioning of these two systems, especially since we have this attitude of a significant section of the social body defending (in the name of Liberty) a system which apparently schools less than 1 in 5 pupils on average but which, in fact, affects a much higher proportion of pupils and families.

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<sup>1</sup> The complete results of this research have appeared in 1991 in a book entitled: Langouët (G) , Léger (A) , *Public or Private ? Schooling careers and successes* (Ecole publique ou école privée : trajectoires et réussites scolaires), Paris, Éditions Fabert.

<sup>2</sup> Expression used by R. Ballion, *School clients*, Paris, Stock, 1982.

The successive laws governing subsidies to private education (especially the Debré law of 1959) have contributed to the establishment of a structured private sector whose functions, formerly closely linked to denominational factors, have nowadays been deeply modified. As A. Prost observes, these schools “ supply another chance to the victims of the State-directed system ” <sup>3</sup>. At the same time, we are witnessing a remarkable transformation in the French people's opinion of private education. If, in 1946, 23% declared themselves to be in favour of State subsidies for this private sector, only 23% were against these same measures in 1974. In 1982, 58% of pupils' parents in the State sector considered the private school as a valid backup infrastructure to solve the schooling difficulties affecting their children <sup>4</sup>.

An initial study was carried out, based on the statistical data supplied by the various departments of the Ministry of Education <sup>5</sup>. The stated objectives of this study were to illustrate the recent trends in the respective market shares of State and private schooling vis-a-vis regional authorities and schooling levels. We also compared the social origins of the pupils schooled in both sectors, examined the main variables involved in the pupils' ages right through their primary and secondary school education as well as the pupil-transfer rate from one system to another during the last

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<sup>3</sup> Prost (A). “ Private schools change function ” in the *General History of Schooling in France* (Vol. IV), Paris, Labat, 1982, p. 413.

<sup>4</sup> Opinion poll or survey results especially drawn from : Savary (A). *In all Liberty*. Paris, Hachette, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Langouët (G). State and private education : coexistence or complementarity ? Symposium of Rouen, 1985.

decade. Besides observing already well-known regional differences, we noticed quite a clear-cut increase in the private sector's share in most regional educational authorities where it had formerly been relatively small. We also observed that the private sector, after a significant reduction of influence during the 1960-1970 period, had seemed to stabilise its overall intake share for some ten years and even slightly increased its share at the secondary-education level. Thus, there was an increase in schooling transfers (always more frequent in the State to private schools than the private to State) of more than 40% between 1972-73 and 1983-84. Moreover, it appeared to us that this increase in the private schooling rates also caused a significant increase in the average age of the avulsed pupils which could not only be explained by repeating years in this sector. There also appeared a slight fudging of the clear-cut differences in social composition between the school populations of these two sectors. Consequently, even if the State and private sectors by and large preserve their specific population features, they do seem to operate as complementary systems more and more. Many parents have recourse to one or other systems especially when their children have not made the grade or experienced difficulties in doing so. Undoubtedly, the reasons for these transfers are unknown and deserve being clarified. In any case, the increase in frequency demonstrates the increasing attachment of a large part of Society (still to be identified quantitatively and qualitatively) to the twofold system of education.

However these fragmentary observations, elaborated on the basis of data referring to stocks and not flow rates, only constitute hypotheses. Nevertheless, they raise at least three questions or series of questions.

— First of all, for the total duration of a school career and generation of pupils, what is the real extent of transfers carried out between the State

and private systems ? As a matter of fact, during their school career, how many pupils actually make use of the possibilities offered by the presence of a twofold schooling network ?

— Then : when, at what level of studies and in what circumstances do pupils and their families have recourse to transfers ? In what conditions, at what age or moment of schooling do they leave one of these sectors to join — or rejoin — the other ?

— Finally, from the sociological viewpoint, which are the pupils using these possibilities ? Are the pupils leaving the State sector representative of all the State-sector pupils ? And those of the private sector, are they representative of private-sector pupils ? Do specific social categories — and if so, which ones — use the twofold system possibilities more ?

Recourse to the study of pupils' flowrates became necessary. For this reason, we went deep into the data drawn from the various pupil follow-ups carried out by the statistical departments of the Ministry of Education (MEN). First of all, our work centred around the analysis of data taken from the sample group set up by the MEN starting from the years 1972-73-74 : a follow-up, right to the end of their schooling, of a representative sample group of 34,437 pupils having entered 1st year in those years.

Besides confirming the previously established results, the analysis of the data drawn from this sample group-enabled us to highlight :

1) The extent of transfers between the State and private sector. As regards the private sector, it appears that “ casual clients ” are often as numerous as “ faithful clients ”. All in all more than one third of the pupils used the private sector during their schooling. Therefore, for an entire generation, the percentage of pupils having at least once transferred

between the Preparatory Course (PC) and the end of the schooling follow-up rises to 27.8%. If we add to that the “ all private ” courses, we then note that 35.3% of a generation of pupils have at least temporarily used the private sector <sup>6</sup>. We must still add two more comments :

— If we took as the reference unit the families using the private sector and not the pupils considered separately from their peer group, these rates would increase even more ;

— The end of the pupil follow-up by MEN does not always mean the end of schooling. We only have to think, for example, of the numerous “ Graduating Centres ” and private-style technical or University level institutions. This pursuit of schooling or quest for an extra-curricular professional qualification could only indeed increase the share of the private sector in schooling, if it were to be taken into account.

2) A recourse to transfer limited to difficulties especially arising from non-achieving at school. Apart from entry into 1st year, the transfers in question always affect a pupil population whose average age is higher than that of the “ stable ” pupils. Transferring sector is connected to school non-achievement. as can be seen from the fact that 80.7% of the pupils who changed over sector had fallen behind then they left the long schooling cycle as against 72.4%, for the set of stable pupils. Consequently these difficulties eliminated pupils before their graduating class where

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<sup>6</sup> About this aspect of research, consult especially :

— Langouët (G), Léger (A). The schooling course and State-private sector transfers. *Société française*, no. 22, January-March 1987, pp. 42-50.

— Langouët (G), Léger (A). “ Schooling courses and recourse to the private sector ”, in Perrenoud (P), Montandon (C) : *Who dominates the school ? Policies of institutions and the praxis of agents*, Lausanne, Réalités sociales, 1988, pp. 302-328.

“ transferees ” succeeded to a lesser degree (9% less) than the stable pupils.

3) A recourse unequally shared out, according to social classes. Specifically, as regards secondary education, transfers are carried out much more by high-income socio-professional categories (SPC) and very little by children from a working-class background. Thus, this recourse indeed contributes to the widening of social inequalities vis a vis the school. If we only take into account the two categories which most present for official competitive exams (the senior manager and manual worker categories), we notice that 33.6% of senior managers' children transferred (private-sector rate of use : 46.1%) against 22.9% of manual workers' children (private sector rate of use : 27.1%). This overall difference is already significant but it is even more marked if we observe the behaviour patterns of these two socio-professional categories (SPC), according to the schooling situation of the pupils. Indeed, for one and the other, a transfer more often than not takes place for non-achieving pupils. However it should be noted that the disparities are even more marked by the fact that senior managers' children, when compared to manual workers', change sectors in greater numbers for cases of “ falling behind ” than for normal age levels (42.6% of senior managers' children having fallen behind transfer against only 24.7% when they are “ up-to-date ” while, for the manual workers' children, the disparities are more reduced : 24.1% for having “ fallen behind ” and 17% being “ up-to-date ”).

Thus, it is indeed the socio-professional categories already more favoured in their schooling context which also have greater recourse to the possibilities of remedial classes offered by the twofold system of schooling. Therefore the various SPCs are not on an equal footing when developing their “ strategies ” to find a solution to education problems.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that the existence of a transfer does not always imply the existence of a “ strategy ”. This is especially the case for transfers to the private sector for vocational or technical training : these transfers are due, then, not so much to the family's choice but to the high quality establishments of this type of vocational training within the private sector. Therefore, since we already know that it is basically the “ fallen behind ” children of manual workers who are sent to vocational-training schools, we understand that the establishing of “ strategies ” (defined as the free choice of a means to attain a chosen end) almost totally becomes the exclusive privilege of the upper-income SPCs. Imposed transfers especially affect the manual workers’ children (and farmers, for these very reasons) while transfers freely chosen and used as backup strategies especially involve upper-income SPCs.

In an extension to these two studies, and over the same 1972-73-74 sample group, we compared the school careers of pupils who remained “ faithful ” (either to State or private education and we assessed the yield-rates of these stable pupils i.e. the effectiveness of both sectors <sup>7</sup>.

Beforehand, let us note that an inter-sector comparison will mean nothing if it is done globally due to their various social recruiting grounds and exchanges of pupils. Basically, it is between identical social groups and pupils never having left their initial sector that the comparisons will take on significant meaning.

\* In a normal 3 rd-year class, the State sector preserves nearly 66% of its 1st year pupils : the private sector more than 76%. Moreover, it will

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<sup>7</sup> Langouët (G), Léger (A). *Public and private schooling : what effectiveness*. Symposium “ Changing technical and vocational schools ”, Paris, I.N.R.P., March 1988.



be noted that passing into 3rd year from the State to the private sector is proportionately less frequent than that of the private to the State system. The main beneficiaries of this lesser elimination carried out by the private sector are the “ fallen behind ” pupils. Among the various SPCs, those benefiting are the children of employees and especially manual workers'.

— When entering 5th year, the same overall disparities are to be seen : 38.5% of 1st-year pupils have not been eliminated in the State system, 48.7% in the private sector. There again, having “ fallen behind ” is a lesser handicap for entry into 5th year in the private sector than in the State system. But the advantage concomitant with frequenting the private sector is very unequally apportioned according to the social classes concerned : no advantage (and even a slight disadvantage) for farmers' children, a small benefit for senior managers' children, a slightly greater advantage for manual workers' children (especially for the older among them), of great benefit for children coming from “ middle management ” and the most benefit for employees' children.

— When referring to the number of pupils in 1st year, those who remained “ faithful ” to their original sector whatever the duration of their studies scored a graduation rate of 21.7% in the State sector and 28% in the private sector. This highlights the positive effects of less numerous, previous eliminations on the success rate at this exam. Moreover, we can notice that the difference in success rates between the State and private sectors is relatively small and less than 4 points for the “ on-time ” pupils throughout their school career : for pupils having fallen behind, the gap widens much more. Yet, it is especially in terms of social-class membership that the most interesting data can be observed. If the State and private sectors are practically on the same footing as regards senior managers' children (State : 58.8% ; private : 58.1%) or those of middle management

(State : 33.9% ; private : 34.3%) and if the success rate of farmers' children is higher in the State sector (20.8%) than in the private one (15.6%) while the reverse situation is true for the manual workers' children (in the private 14.3%, in the State system 12.2%), the great beneficiaries of the private system are the children of employees who with 33% of graduates (21% in the State system) practically reach the score attained by middle management's children in both the sectors.

These results deserve to be seriously scrutinised and analysed. It would be simplistic to conclude from them that one of the two sectors is better than the other at such and such a level or for this or that type of pupil. However, it would also be futile to deny them rather than look for an interpretation even if the latter is complex or the causes for the observed disparities be very probably multiple. In any case, these differences demonstrate that progress is possible even if the proclaimed objective of 74% of secondary school graduates is still far from being reached in either of the sectors.

The fourth part of this research paper deals with the analysis of trends presented between the 1972-73-74 sample group and a new set followed by the MEN from 1980 onwards. We could observe very numerous changes, often of a surprising range and extent, considering that the 6 to 7-year period separating the two observation points is very short. The main results can be summarised as follows :

- The transfer rate has noticeably increased to the detriment of stable courses whether they be “ all State ” or “ all private ” ;

- This lowering of faithfulness to a single sector has brought about an increase in the total portion share of a generation which uses the private sector (currently 37%), even if this aforesaid increase in the

number of private-sector users is translated into more temporary passages and less permanent sejours ;

— The strategies of the different social classes appeared to be changing in organisation mode, particularly for the senior managers who have followed a counter-current trend as regards other social groups ;

— Reflecting changes in social structures, the composition of both sectors has been modified but unequally thus leading to an undeniable democratisation of the private sector ;

\_ However, this democratisation does not mean that a social “ melting pot ” has taken place : on the contrary, the social of the establishments has been reinforced in both sectors ;

— The proportion of “ normal ” schooling has significantly increased in both sectors even if this decrease in the “ fallen behind ” rate is accompanied, especially in the “ all public ” sector, of delays equal to or more than two years ;

— The effectiveness of both sectors vis a vis pupils of different social origins has been profoundly changed especially as regards farmers' and employees' children ;

— The private sector has continued to reduce the social inequalities of success between manual workers' and senior managers' children more quickly than the State sector.

Therefore, this balance sheet shows the significant in-depth and numerous variations. Admittedly, if we were to look for authentic upheavals in the functioning or structure of the two systems, the conclusion would obviously be very different. The social inequalities of

success, although slightly decreasing, continue to characterise the two sectors markedly. The general lowering of the backwardness rate for pupils when arriving in 1st year is not translated, indeed far from it, by a corresponding increase in the admission rates in the 3rd, 5th or 6th years. Thus, selection has increased either by the increased elimination of “slow” pupils or by them repeating years : the latter measure has decreased at the primary school level but increased in the secondary (for all SPCs in the “all State” and for three categories out of six in the “all private”). As a matter of fact, the schooling system has seemingly raised its demands. In one way or another, the secondary school (thanks to its trends) has managed to maintain its selective practices essentially unchanged while an immutable maintaining of previous selection criteria would necessarily have involved markedly higher admission flows of pupils into the 5th and 6th years.

As regards the “agents”, the evolution in strategies also has the aim of maintaining some previous privileges : if things are adapted, it is to better preserve the status quo. As regards choices, the social and geographic inequalities have not changed : the “school clients” are still as unequal as before and tend to be nevermore so. If all the SPCs have had their transfer rates raised, for their part the senior managers' children have hardly seen their rate increase in the case of academic failure. “Navigation by the stars” is increasing for the other categories and “strategic” transfer in 1st year for the senior managers' category. Therefore, it is the whole set of strategic choices of establishment which has been modified in the period under consideration.

To conclude, we will assert that our results enable us to invalidate seven erroneous ideas :

— The *first erroneous idea* consists in greatly under-estimating the real number of the private-sector users by only taking into account the proportion of the pupils schooled by this sector such as it appears in the Ministerial statistics for a given year. Now then, we have shown that the great majority of private-sector users are of a temporary nature. Considering the numeric significance of transfers between the two sectors (nearly 25% of a generation), only a longitudinal study carried out over the whole school career of pupils would enable us to accurately know the authentic position share really occupied by private schooling in their formative years. In this way, in the 1972-73-74 sample group, more than 35% of pupils used the private sector at least temporarily : this portion share can be rated at 37% in the 1980 sample group.

— The *second erroneous idea* leads us to an ignorance of the true nature of private-sector users by assimilating their motives to religious reasons. In fact, a whole series of data (and particularly the fact that transfers are often linked to academic difficulties and so clearly seem, except for entry into 1st year, as a practical recourse against failure) enable us to demonstrate that the private sector choice for denominational reasons is extremely small-scale.

— The *third erroneous idea*, developed by several writers, consists in affirming that the existence of two schooling sectors allows for the free choice of school type by families. This liberty, together with the recourse factor as represented by the private school, also seems to advocate for the democratisation of schooling. Yet, the notion of democratisation has at least two different interpretations : it means either a reduction in the social disparities of success or a social recruitment largely open to the working classes. We will come back to this first point when discussing the sixth erroneous idea. As far as the second point is concerned, we have shown

that families have no real possibility of choosing firstly because of the geographical inequalities in the supply of establishments (very different according to the regions in question) but particularly because of social inequalities. We observed a large-scale use of transfers by the privileged social classes and a distinctly smaller usage among the working classes. Therefore, the recourse to transfer in the case of academic failure more often than not serves those who in any case have the lesser statistical chance of failure. From this viewpoint, it thus appears paradoxical to consider the existence of a private sector as constituting a positive asset for the democratisation of schooling. As a matter of fact, then, our results constantly show that only the upper-income classes are really capable of having academic “ strategies ” and using to their advantage the existence of two schooling sectors, either as a recourse against failing or a desire and wish to be distinguished and be “ among their own kind ” within a high-class social milieu.

— Within a closely bound order of ideas, the current version of liberal ideology advocates the autonomy and competitiveness of establishments and sectors (and that in total contradiction to its theory and practice, since the liberal policies of the past caused the “ system insertion ” of private schooling in France and then had it pass from a situation of open competition to one of complementarity vis a vis the public sector). This exaltation of the virtues of competition and consumerism leads to an encouraging of the appearance of a user's mentality in schooling matters. In a specific type of press publication, it also gives rise to the regular publishing of establishments' achievement lists which specifically compare the success rates at final exams. They then work out a classification of these aforesaid establishments according to their supposed value. Here we are dealing with the *fourth erroneous idea*

which we have rejected by demonstrating that these pseudo-evaluations supposedly guiding the choice of families have no true meaning as to the real value of these establishments. In fact, they are only worried about a final result without taking into account either the social origin of the pupils, elimination rate during the school career, initial schooling situation of the pupils resulting from a possible selection at entry to 1st year nor the flowrates of leaving or arriving. Consequently, an authentic evaluation of the establishment-effect can only be carried out on pupils' follow-ups and not on immovable stock. As for ourselves, we carried out an evaluation of this type on the sector effect i.e. comparing the results of private and State schooling for the pupils who had remained faithful to their original sector.

— These results particularly enable us to challenge a *fifth erroneous idea* : that there existed a sort of fatality in the failure of working-class children whether this fatality be due to so-called hereditary or sociological factors. Indeed, we perceive that the same social groups have very different chances of attaining success according to whether they attend State or private school (the farmers' children succeeding better in the State sector, the working classes' and especially the employees' scoring better in the private sector).

— Of course, from these results, we would not go so far as to draw the simplistic conclusion that private schooling is globally better for working-class children. We must rather understand this contradictory reality whereby the private sector is both an antidemocratic place through its social recruiting as well as a better achiever for working-class children (at least for the small proportion of those who attend it). In any case, we should also reject a *sixth erroneous idea* which represents the State school as being democratic, socially neutral and in the service of all children without distinction or difference. If the State system is indeed more

democratic than the private school due to its initial social recruiting, it is less so through its social disparities of success created during the school career by the massive and premature eliminations affecting working-class children.

— Finally, a *seventh erroneous idea* presents the schooling system as an ossified institution, little inclined to change. However, we have just enumerated some of the significant transformations wrought in the 6 or 7-year period which separates the two sample groups. Let us summarise them very briefly : both the transfer rate and proportion of “ normal ” schooling have risen ; the social composition of both sectors has been modified towards an undeniable democratisation of the private sector ; the effectiveness of both sectors has undergone a transformation and the private sector has continued to reduce the social inequalities of success quicker than the State sector ; finally, the strategies of the various socio-professional categories have evolved (especially in the case of senior managers' children who are increasing their attendance in the State system in counter-current to the reverse trend which affects all the other groups).

Thus, this series of results brings new light to bear on some aspects of the issue in question while also casting new shadows of doubt. This will afford us with the subject matter for many further papers in this line of research.