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Measures to Combat School Dropout in France: Macro and Micro Visions

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[Review of the books: *Le décrochage scolaire: enjeux, acteurs et politiques de lutte contre la déscolarisation*, by Thierry Berthet and Joël Zaffran. Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014. ISBN 9782753529373. *Répondre au décrochage scolaire. Expériences de terrain*, by Eric Flavier and Sylvie Moussay. France De Boeck, 2014. ISBN 9782804188382]

Nowadays, every European country is concerned with the alarming problem of school dropout. At the European Union level, “the Europe 2020 strategy, through its ‘smart growth’ priority, therefore aims to tackle early school leaving and to raise tertiary education levels” (Eurostat, 2015). This strategy proposes a target of “reducing school dropout rates to less than 10% and increasing the share of the population aged 30 to 34 having completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40% by 2020”.

The current dropout rate in France is about 9.5% (in line with the Europe 2020 target), and was achieved between 2008 and 2013. Comparative studies consider the dropout problem as a benchmark for measuring the effectiveness of a system of education. Furthermore, school dropout is a social and political issue which solicits all European countries to find new policies to address it, at a transnational, national and local level. We are now going to discuss more specifically the French system of education and about some French policy measures adopted against the dropout problem recently.

As explained by François Dubet in the introduction of the book by Thierry Berthet and Joël Zaffran, the imperative of the “School of the

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Republic” (*Ecole de la Republique*) in France is that everyone must succeed (Dubet, 2000). So-called “educational success” corresponds to an optimistic objective supported by the Nation. In other words, the model of reference in France is the equality of opportunities model, according to which each person has the right to succeed. The school must develop the human capital seen as indispensable for economic growth, and qualifications count more and more in this process. The diploma becomes the symbol of some required skills: it plays a fundamental role in the access to a job, the statute of the worker and his remuneration. According to Dubet, the emergence of school dropouts as a crucial social issue results from the joint effect of the imperative of the equality of the opportunities and of the increasing importance of the diplomas for entering the job market. Therefore, the problem of school dropout shows the difficulties to match education to the job market and it stigmatizes the students who are not able or who do not want to “play the game” of success for all. For instance, the French system of education introduced the ideal of a balancing mechanism, according to which every education or training must guarantee access into the labor market. This explains why sometimes school dropout could appear as a rational strategic choice when the ability to obtain diplomas is increasingly disconnected from the ability to create employment (Duru-Bellat, 2006). But the choice of leaving early turns out to be very problematic: young people who leave education and training prematurely lack crucial skills and run the risk of facing serious, persistent disadvantages in the labor market and experiencing poverty and social exclusion. They are also more likely to be in precarious and low-paying jobs and to draw on welfare and other social programs (Eurostat, 2015).

Therefore, it is interesting to focus on the macro and micro-level reasons of the dropout phenomenon (for instance, at the macro level transformations of the job market, new school regulation system, etc. and, at the micro level, dynamics and interactions within the classroom, etc.). Two books published in 2014 are useful to investigate the topic from both points of view.

The first book, edited by Thierry Berthet and Joël Zaffran *The school dropout: issues, actors and policies to contrast descolarization*, offers a panorama of current French research. It also describes different models of analysis and field experimentation, as well as individual trajectories and some of the most important policy measures adopted in France to contrast the dropout.

The second book is titled *Addressing early school leaving. Field experiences*, edited by Eric Flavier (from LISEC - Laboratoire Interuniversitaire des Sciences de l'Éducation et de la Communication, at Université de la Lorraine) and, Sylvie Moussay (*from Laboratory ACTÉ - Activité, Connaissance, Transmission, éducation*, at University Blaise Pascal in Clermont Ferrand), tries to describe school dropout addressing not only educational authorities, teachers, and policy makers, but also students and families, providing them with a toolkit for better understanding and improving educational practice as well. Both books adopt a sociological approach and agree on considering school dropout as a multifactorial and long-term process. Before underlining further commonalities of the two books and some points of weakness, we are going to describe each one more in detail.

The book written by Thierry Berthet et Joël Zaffran is the edited version of a series of seminar papers created by a research team of the Center Émile Durkheim (CNRS-UMR 5116) during the academic year 2011-2012. The contributions of this book mostly address current dropout standards in the French school system, focusing on graduates of the second cycle of the secondary education. The book composed of eight chapters and it is divided in three parts. The first one reviews the situation and the information about school dropout. The second refers to the models of analysis of school dropout. The third one concerns the description of individual trajectories and of which specific policy measure against early school leaving seems to have worked. Every scientific contribution in this book tries to explain the phenomenon of school dropout in all dimensions, including its administrative definition. According to the most accredited definition in France, early school leaving occurs when a person leaves school without having obtained a general *baccalaurat* or a vocational diploma at level IV or V of the interdepartmental classification of the diplomas¹. The *SIEI* (*Système interministeriel d'échange d'information*) has created the distinction between *drop-out* and *drop-in* (*décroché* and *décrocheur*). In the first case, the student breaks with the institution without having

¹ Decree of 31 December 2010 and circular n° 2011-028 of the 9 February 2011 (MEN-DGESCO). The IV level include all the people who go out from the secondary school, from general or technical/vocational education. Otherwise the people who have a diploma of the V level are whom who obtained un BEP (*Brevet d'Études Professionnelles*) and a CAP (*Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle*), two technical and professionals diplomas.

obtained the diploma (cf. the aforementioned definition), and in the second case the student does not break with the school, but he distances himself from it. In France the number of young people abandoning education has reduced from 170 000 in 1975 to 42000 in 2005 (Source: INSEE, quoted in Boudesseul, 2014, p. 105; see also Blaya, Bergamaschi, 2015). This result depends on a reduction of student cohorts and on a general protraction of schooling in association with a reduction of failures at primary and middle school (Glasman, 2004). After having introduced the various definitions, the book presents some policy measures against the school dropout, which aim at addressing different causes of early school leaving, showing that school can offer a variety of solutions to the youths that have risked abandoning the education system.

Then, considering the peculiarity of French schooling and public management, the volume identifies the multi-level structuration of responses to the problem: there is an *under-structure* (local policies) and a *super-structure* (national governmental policies and European-international policies), which must work with each other. French local policies operate in the schools and in the “Academiés”². In fact, the schools are obliged to identify at-risk students while still enrolled at school, through the so-called GPDSs, (*Groupes de prévention du décrochage scolaire*) that is, inter-professional groups of prevention). The Academies are instead responsible for the policy measures of recovery of the youths, through for example the MLDS (*Mission de lutte contre le décrochage scolaire*)³, which identifies the students during the breaking with institution, and the *Mission Locale*, that deals with the introducing into a vocation of the young people that are 18 years of age or older. A super-structure also exists, managed by the State and the supranational organisms, what the active politics advocated from Europe. In his contribution “Le décrochage de haut en bas”, Joël Zaffran explains that policy measure against the early school leaving have existed since 1980 and they are often divided in: policy measure of struggle (as the MLDS, ex MGI), policy measure of recovery (as les *Ecoles de Deuxième chance*, and les *Dispositifs Relais*, Second chances schools) and policy measure of student retrieval (as the system of the *SIEI* adopted in France,

² In France “Académie”, comparable to the Local Education Authorities is an administrative circumscription of the Department of Education and Skills. From the first January 2016, each Local Education Authority corresponds to the Administrative regions.

³ MDLS takes the place of the former MGI (*Missions Générales d’Insertion*) in March 2013.

Système interministeriel d'échange d'information, Interdepartmental system of exchange of information, that depends on the Academy). Following the multi-articulated design of the State fights against school dropout, one original feature of this book is the inclusion of several studies about local policy measures in a more extended context. Is this multi-level structure effective enough to explain how France respects the European target of reducing school dropout rates to less than 10%?

The second book, by Eric Flavier and Sylvie Moussay, composed of 14 chapters and 4 parts. In the first part it analyzes what happens in the classroom that leads to the decision to drop out from school. In the second part it tries to understand the process of school dropout through the point of view of the school programs implemented to combat it. The third part investigates the dropout problem through the multiple opinions that students and teachers have about their work at school. The book ends with a fourth part dealing with the teacher's dropout.

The volume was written in the context of a research project (started in 2001) aimed at accompanying education professionals in their activities. This project involved three Academies in Lyon, Nice and Strasburg and five schools, as well as a penitentiary institute (CEF, *Centre d'éducation fermé*). One of the most innovative feature of this work is that teacher-researchers, researchers, professors of the secondary school, nurses and school managers involved in the project contributed to the development of the volume directly. In fact the book takes a micro-level perspective and focuses on what happens in classrooms, drawing from these findings different types of *décrocheur* both among students and teachers⁴. The book also looks into the lived experiences and shows that an increased involvement of the educational groups (teachers included) can be an important tool in the prevention of school disengagement.

Moreover, the volume clarifies the organization of some local policy measure and actions carried out by the "clinical approach of the activity" (Clot, 2008), for which the scientific objective is "to transform for better understanding". It deals with professional development of education professionals, as well as with the elaboration of alternative activities for recovering students. It represents a remarkable example of a research project in which results could be used practically by the educational community (action-research). The methodology adopted in this book is also

⁴ See the State Report on Teachers' pain in Gauthier- Morin, (2012).

peculiar: researchers often used observation, and video recording of class dynamics. They then showed these videos to all participants, so as to “cross their feedbacks”: the idea was that teachers and students could compare their own practices, thus fueling an evolution in their *modus operandi*. As anticipated, the objective of the book is to provide a guide to be used by teachers and researchers.

In this book is also that teachers as well as students act as research participants. Therefore, much space is dedicated to the analysis of concrete case studies: for instance, interventions in the classes and alternative teaching methods. For example, the use of the information and communication technologies (Pécout & Méard, 2014) and the case of the subject of EPS, physical education and sport is particularly interesting, as the authors demonstrate that this subject is useful to enhance self-confidence in the pupils at risk of dropping out, and helps them to justify their presence at school (Bergamaschi, 2014: see also Bergamaschi & Méard, 2012).

A similar dynamic can be observed in the activities within the CEF, an education penitentiary institute, where a project was developed to educate young detainees by making them feel part of an institution and reestablishing formerly lost relationships between learners and teachers (Evangelista, Blanc, 2014). Other dynamics carried out in individual institutes are educational alliances (collaboration among the key actors) and the “*sens du travail scolaire*”, the meaning of the work done at school that often disappears for both students and teachers who are in an early school leaving process (see also Besozzi, 2009). Sometimes it is necessary to encourage self-esteem and confidence in these students from the very beginning, helping them to succeed more quickly and making them feel that they are capable of doing a good job. The introduction of technology in the classes “*entreprise virtuelle*” (virtual enterprise) also provides a good occasion to enhance interdisciplinary connections between subjects (Flavier, 2014). The use of the new technologies could also lead to a greater involvement of the students in the school activity.

Regarding the dropout process for teachers, in the ninth chapter of the book by Sylvie Moussay talks about the “professional dropout/burnout” as a crucial problem of the French society. This chapter shows that the professional burnout of teachers can be found in the loss of meaning (*deficit du sens*) of the work done at school with students. As underlined by other French sociologists, as Lothaire, Dumay and Dupriez (2012),

professional turnover of teachers depends on some objective reasons as well as on the years of work, the subject of teaching and their social-demographic characteristics but also on some individual characteristics, such as their professional satisfaction and engagement. The book by Eric Flavier and Sylvie Moussay shows that teachers who work with dropout students are often psychologically and physically involved, investing a lot of themselves in their activity. They often find various obstacles until their health becomes at risk. These teachers often adapt the policy measures to use school dropout to justify their activity. With their new practices, they contribute to re-establish a common meaning of the work done at school between students and teachers and, more generally between the educational community.

Finally, the volume goes into the *black box* of the work done at school: it analyzes the identity construction processes, as a “construction together” between students and teachers. The action-research seems to indicate that teaching often becomes a situation of negotiated interaction, in which the aim of the teacher is to fight against the "cognitive abandonment" in a paradoxical frame in which the student does not attribute a meaning to the activity proposed by the school. As a result, this second book clarifies the relationships that exist between the way in which the teachers act in the classroom and the ways in which they expose the schoolwork instructions and their preparation, that have an effect on the meaning that students attribute to the work done at school. And what often represents a problem in France is that teachers are not trained to knowledgeably manage hyper-critical situations. Finally, school dropout is a process in which the actions of teachers are at odds with the students' actions. The resolution of this tension can give new meaning to school-work, as a result of a compromise, of a negotiated interaction between teachers and students, in order to establish new practices.

We are now going to talk about the common weaknesses of these two books. First, in my opinion, the general architecture behind the multi-articulated design of the State (about the policy measures to counter the dropout problem) is not exposed in details. In the first text, authors explain that policy measures in France are addressing different causes of early school leaving, showing that school can offer a variety of solutions to the youths that have abandoned/are at risk of abandoning the education system. This aspect is not discussed in depth and this could bring about a problem of legibility by a non-French reader. Moreover, the variety of French policy

measures could probably confuse teachers who try to understand the functioning of this dense structure. What happens in France is probably that teachers are more concentrated on understanding the bureaucracy, rather than in focusing on their own practice and on what they really are, and can do, that is, teaching and educating young people.

Comparing the two books we can observe that they are complementary. The first text focuses more on the macro level of early school leaving, such as the administrative definition and the explanation of the dropout as a process that is positioned in a specific institutional context; the second text brings instead the micro level dimension and investigates the relationships that are the core issue of the school abandonment. What also links the two texts is the idea that dropout takes place at the same time at school, within the family and across the group of friends. It is the way by which these three agents are linked together that makes the difference. For this reason they both seem to be deeply inspired by the mainstream of “*alliances éducatives*”, widespread in all the francophone area (where the book by Gilles, Porvin and Tièche-Cristinat, 2012 earned great attention by experts and professionals). In France the institutional and legal frame of the fight against school dropout is well structured and supported by State impulse. However, at the “street level” those dealing with school dropout must demonstrate the ability to mobilize many actors of an enlarged educational community with the goal of working together to agree upon a common meaning of the school-work. In other words, beyond the “technicism” of policy measure of student retrieval, contrast and prevention of early school leaving, all the aforementioned scientific contributions suggest that school dropout issue engages the school organization at its very roots and asks for deep reforms as necessary.

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