Preventing Absenteeism and Dropping Out : Tension in the School System

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Penal Issues

Preventing Absenteeism and Dropping Out: Tension in the School System

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This action research project on the prevention of school absenteeism and dropping out was first formulated during the 2006-2007 school year. It was conducted, under the patronage of the Paris *Académie*, in those of Paris' most affected schools which agreed to participate. These high schools (liberal arts and vocational) and junior high schools had been experiencing repeated truancy among students, many of whom left school without a degree. Some schools had already set up prevention or remedial schemes.

Methodology

This research was conducted in nine establishments located in the Paris *Académie*, including six vocational high schools, one liberal arts high school, one school complex (*cité scolaire*) and one junior high school. The principals had been contacted by the Paris Académie hierarchy on the basis of criteria defined by the researchers (voluntary participation, upper-echelon executive staff who had been in the establishment relatively long and were accessible, problem of absenteeism or dropping out acknowledged as such in the school, availability of a variety of curricula). Following preparatory meetings in each establishment, resource persons (members of the executive and administrative staff or CPEs *conseillers principaux d'éducation*[3]) participated in interviews and facilitated meetings with the school staff (teachers, social worker, nurse, « school life » team, including school assistants) and with students. Each category was seen separately, with students met individually or in groups, and with or without their teachers. The researchers left the organisers free to arrange these meetings in accordance with local possibilities (when the staff and students were available and willing). All of the students encountered were frequent absentees, and some were already on the way to dropping out. A listing and quantitative analysis of their absences was established in addition to qualitative data.

Interviews, data, participation in meetings and informal observation findings were collected, reported to the principals, and validated by them and by those participants whose quoted statements were most recognisable[4]. This study was fed back to those school communities whose managerial staff felt it useful. All in all, the project yielded reports for six schools, with progress memos made for the other three since the original adherence to the project had waned in the meanwhile and interviewing of all of the actors involved was not feasible.

Two meetings took place, in March 2009 and March 2010, with the managerial staff of all of the establishments originally committed to participating and representatives of the Paris *Académie*, to report on the development of the project and comment a synopsis of the various reports, to be circulated to all interested parties.

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By « validated » we mean that actors (including researchers) agreed to their circulation within the establishment, for consultation by any interested adult. Amendments to the first drafts mostly affected quotations, since some people who had spoken quite freely wished to submit more « measured » written texts, as they considered the fact that they would be read by other members of the same school community.

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[1] *Groupe de Recherches et d'Études Sociologiques de Centre Ouest.*

[2] Esterle M., Douat É., 2007-2009, *Recherche-action autour de la lutte contre l'absentéisme et le décrochage scolaire et pour le renforcement de l'assiduité des élèves*, Paris, Académie de Paris, GIP- FCIP, FSE. France is divided into areas known as *académies* for educational administration purposes.

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School absenteeism and dropping out: clarifying the concepts

« Dropping out » has a variety of definitions: some refer to the situation of youths who have either no skill or no diploma[5]. They have then indeed left the school system. In France, recent instructions from the Ministry of Education define drop-outs without any reference to age and emphasise the need for developing detection and prevention[6].

Dropping out of school may also be defined as a « more or less prolonged process (of leaving the school system), not necessarily attended by explicit information confirming an exit from the institution »[7]. « Drop-outs » in this case are often still present at school, and absenteeism is one manifestation of dropping out. Another expression would be « internal dropping out », with the student still present at school but no longer interested in learning.

A student is defined as an absentee « when the child did not attend class, with no legitimate reason or valid excuse, for at least four half-days within the month »[8]. In fact, in the schools reviewed in our action research, « absentee » students had far more absences than that, irrespective of the reckoning method.

Absences may take various forms: absence over a long period of time, numerous short absences, selective absence from some classes, activities or periods of the year, complete absence with no explanation from the student and/or his or her parents, and so on: this list is not exhaustive. These do not necessarily indicate a process of dropping out, and many can be prevented or remedied by the schools themselves. Resumption of schooling cannot be reduced to going back to class, meaning no more absences; it is only effective if learning becomes meaningful for the student, who again participates in it.

Analytical Tools

To analyse the interviews collected and determine their consistency, we used the distinctions operated by Bertrand and Valois between various educational paradigms[9]. These paradigms identify priori-ties and behavioural standards in schools. According to these French Canadian researchers, school systems oscillate between compliance with the rules and obedience necessary to the acquisition of knowledge (what they call the « industrial » paradigm) and the student's personal development in all areas – knowledge, emotional life, creativity (called the « existential » paradigm).

While keeping in mind the various paradigms defining educational standards, we based our structuring and classification of data on analysis of the school climate, and more specifically on the work of Georges Fotinos[10]. This French scholar differentiates:

1) The work climate (perceived motivation among students and teachers, educational, managerial and administrative vitality, school life, partnerships);

2) the interpersonal and learning climate (perceived relations between the different categories of actors involved, the general school climate, sense of security);

3) the organisational and fairness climate (perceived organisation, consistency of rules within the defined framework, clarity or lack thereof of sanctions, implemented or not; institutional framework and project, meaning: what is « acceptable » and what is not, particularly in giving reasons for one's absences).

High schools and devalued curricula

The schools studied were characterised by an overrepresentation of students with learning disabilities, from underprivileged homes. Despite differences in perception among the actors, there was a definite tendency to view these establishments as places of relegation (or even places « to be fled »), with a rather bad reputation.

Liberal arts high schools received students excluded from private or public schools because of their poor achievements, or sent there failing acceptance in a more reputable public high school.

In the vocational high schools, some students have assimilated the educational and vocational fate assigned to them, but others resist, so to speak, by playing hooky and/or by developing a line of reasoning deprecating the curriculum to which they were oriented. One school is an exception, however: its departments receive students coming from a SEGPA or an EREA[11], who tend to be flattered at working toward a vocational degree (*CAP*). For many, vocational high school seems to rhyme with failure (they are in fact sent there because they aren't « good enough » to attend a liberal arts or technological high school). Few students had actually made the school their first choice, then. The majority went there because they were refused elsewhere. Those who made this curriculum their first choice were not necessarily aware of its content and of the jobs to which they lead, and were somewhat disappointed when they discovered them. Many students had hoped they would not encounter the same kind of schooling they found it so difficult to endure in junior high school, including rather « theoretical, general » courses, lecturing, ranking and grades. Now, these all exist in vocational schools as well, and may generate discouragement, repeated absences or even dropping out. The academic level of many absentee students is insufficient to keep up with their courses, so they tend to flee to avoid facing the repetition, day after day, of feelings of academic failure. This loss of contact then compounds the earlier gaps in learning and makes it impossible to return to class unless this sort of spiral is taken into consideration, by teachers in particular.

Absences generated by organisational rules

Lateness and absence are usually recorded as follows by the data-collection computer programme: late for the first hour = 1 hour absence = absence for a half-day. Some establishments count lateness as such, but they are a minority.

This system is undeniably a point of friction between students and « school life » teams. Some students pointed out that when they realise they will be late for the first hour, they decide they will not go to school at all, since recording of their lateness/absence will be the same, irrespective of whether they were present or not (this is mostly true of high schools). They report conflicts at home when their parents receive notification of absence based on those administrative rules.

There is disagreement between teachers, who sometimes prefer to have students attend courses even if they arrive late, and *CPE*s and principals, who continue to bar students from the classroom when late, and often apply the administrative label of absence to those lateness cases. Latecomers are therefore repeatedly excluded from a greater portion of the lessons than that for which they themselves are responsible. However, when students have several straight hours of shop class (in vocational schools), they are usually allowed into the shop when they are late for the first hour.

When students arrive late for the first hour of the day they are generally left outside the school premises. Few

[5] Eurostat (The Statistics Division of the European communities) and the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) define drop-outs as youths aged 18 or 20, respectively, to 24, who have no qualification or secondary school diploma and are not enrolled in any studies or training program. The Lisbon summit in 2000 replaced the notion of « without any qualification » to « without a diploma ».

[6] *Bulletin Officiel du ministère de l'Éducation nationale*, 2009, 23, 4 juin.

[7] GUIGUE M., 1998, Peut-on définir le décrochage ?, *in* BLOCH M.C., GERDE B., *Les lycéens décrocheurs*, Lyon-Paris, Chronique Sociale, 25-38 and 29.

[8] Article L. 131-8 of the Code of Education.

[9] BERTRAND Y., VALOIS P., 1992, *École et sociétés*, Ottawa, Éditions Agence d'Arc.

[10] FOTINOS G., 2006, *Le climat scolaire dans les lycées et collèges*, Paris, Éditions de la MGEN.

[11] *Section d'enseignement général professionnel adapté* (Special general vocational education department) and *Établissement d'enseignement régional adapté* (Special regional educational establishment).

schools arrange for them to enter and remain in a study room to await the second hour.

When students are already absentees or in the process of dropping out some sanctions such as repeated exclusion from the classroom or exclusion for one or several days, which are very frequent, practically « *routine* » in some establishments, push them further away from school. Such exclusions are not necessarily based on absence or lateness, and may involve forgetting of school supplies or attitudes deemed disrespectful or incompatible with a proper teaching climate: « for insulting a teacher, you get two days! », one principal explains, illustrating the automatic nature of exclusion as a sanction. As a result, such punishment deprives students of course hours for which there is no replacement schoolwork, and at the same time requires that they catch up with the missed courses, usually on their own. In the last analysis, they further reinforce students' resistance to the obligation to attend school, and turn absenteeism into a commonplace behavioural pattern.

An Administrative, Coercive View of School Absences and Dropping out

In most of the schools reviewed, a great deal of time and much of the energy, especially that of the « school life » team, is devoted to the tedious, considerable job of managing absenteeism (that is, to identifying, recording, counting, and reporting it and its reasons, etc.). Discharge of this task, day after day, by the supervisors and *CPE*, actually leaves them little time to develop studies aimed at identifying the underlying causes of absenteeism and dropping out (over and beyond the reasons given by students and their families).

A combination of insufficient educational or supervisory personnel, the institutional routine and organisational necessities explains why absenteeism problems, potentially leading to dropping out, are usually dealt with as emergencies, with no ongoing coordination between the actors involved. Students are treated relatively uniformly, irrespective of the distance between their home and the school, the kind of family supervision they receive and the responsibilities they shoulder privately (within their family, for example). This lack of « discernment » and of more personalised treatment does not make for equitable management of absences, and further increases the distance between students and the school administration.

As a rule, tardiness and absence are viewed as misbehaviour requiring punishment rather than as signs of lack of interest in learning, or of the gap between youth lifestyles and school requirements. What is demanded is that students comply with the regulations, not that they understand and internalise lifestyle rules such as regularity. Moreover, penalties are not always enforced for lack of supervisory staff; this is the case for hours of after-school detention. Some in-house regulations are drastic but unknown to teachers; they are actually not well known to teachers and so produce a mixture of contradictory, changing practices. Authority is asserted in ways unconvincing to students. The outcome is that in some schools they rely on the way some teacher, school life staff or principal deals with problems, rather than on a flat regulation.

Life inside the Establishment

Along with these imposed standards there is a lack informal meeting places for students : few schools have set up « student facilities » (in high schools) or socio-educational areas (in junior high schools) on the grounds. Actually, most of students' social life takes place off the premises, especially for high school students. The fact is that in most cases they are not allowed to drink, eat or smoke (any more than adults, in the latter case) in the premises. Access to bathrooms is not always easy (especially during construction work, which disturbs the physical organisation of schools for years at a time). Recreation yards are not always adequate for the number of students. They therefore often find themselves in uncomfortable situations that are propitious neither to learning nor to informal exchanges, especially with adults. The latter have teachers' rooms and or offices (for the other personnel), where they can enjoy the social interaction so necessary during their rest periods. For students, schools are in fact much less attractive than the outside world.

Student Ambivalence

Oscillation is the most salient feature in most students' behaviour[12]. As a rule, most students who do not attend courses regularly are not so much real dropouts as poorly adjusted to the norms that supposedly condition course attendance and improved achievements. They would like to pursue their schooling, but many do not realise the link between regularity and success and have very little proficiency in the techniques that must be developed to learn and remember the information provided by their teachers, on whom they are extremely dependent. In that sense, they are not in rebellion against the school system and do not reject it, but rather, they are not integrated in its functioning and in its overall pattern (lectures and theoretical courses, shops, internships, organisation of eve-

[12] This is one of the main findings of Étienne Douat's study of absenteeism in several junior high schools in the Val d'Oise *département* (*cf.* DOUAT, 2005).

ryday life around the goal of getting a degree, etc.). They seem to worry about their future, to confront major difficulties, and to lack access to the necessary « directions for use » of high school life, which may partially account for their particular relation to regularity and knowledge.

Their relation to time involves little long-term projection, and the consequences of their absences on their school achievements seem abstract and unclear since they are in a distant future, whereas they are obvious to teachers. « Don't worry, I'm going to succeed » is a statement often heard by teachers and *CPE*s, although the student has been absent for dozens of hours and has grades below 5/20 in every subject matter. These paradoxes explain why some students who have been absent practically all year long are galvanised only by the need to register for the following year. They apply for a new registration, not even in consideration of its importance in terms of maintained scholarships or family benefits: they are sincerely convinced that they will study normally then, which turns out not to be true.

At the same time, they criticize the school for taking little interest in their ongoing presence, but they view that presence in terms of more or less close relations with the school personnel, rather than as an intrinsic, inescapable necessity for academic achievement. In this context, their boredom in some courses may be a serious factor of academic demotivation.

Students or adolescents: contradictory lifestyles

Furthermore, factors pertaining to the lifestyles of students outside of the school may be correlated with repeated absences of various types, and possibly with a dropping out process. These include lack of parental supervision on schooling, wage-earning (odd jobs), responsibilities within the family (taking care of younger brothers and sisters, especially for girls), peer groups geared to entertainment or other, possible use of legal or illegal drugs, delinquency, and so on.

In some places youths claim to stay out late (« *they have fun* ») and sometimes go to bed at two or three in the morning, or stay outside near their home, with their buddies (« *they hang around* »), chat or exchange mails on Internet, etc. Students' lack of sleep was recurrent in all of the schools in this study. It is often mentioned by students themselves and by school life workers, teachers and nurses, along with an unbalanced diet and health problems.

Those very short nights make it impossible to get up early, shorten the attention span, impede learning and make students more irritable and tense. After a

short night they rush out to school without any breakfast. Some students are consistently hungry during the morning, making it difficult for them to pay attention and concentrate on learning.

Lack of parental authority over the life rhythms of some adolescents contributes to the difficulties they encounter in pursuing their schooling.

Actually, many of the students who are often absent leave for school and return home completely on their own, since their parents or the adults around them are absent at the time or think their children are « big enough » to take care of themselves.

Are bonds a preventive factor?

When adults and students know each other well they participate more actively. This was particularly true in one establishment, where it did not do miracles, but did bring students' difficulties to light in time, so that intervention was more effective. « We make every effort for them to attend and to succeed » is something often heard by the staff of that school, teachers included. Another reason for this attitude is the risk that the curricula and their attached teaching positions will be suppressed if students completely cease to attend them.

The drive behind students' attendance at school and pursuit of their schooling is their relations with other students, teachers, and the other adults in the establishment, along with the belief that the careers for which they are trained (in vocational schools) will enable them to find a job after graduation, or at least will be useful in their future line of work. Some students who « *chose* » (a relative term in many cases, as seen above) a particular vocational programme have been seen to end their studies, whereas others who were being trained for something they never really wanted continued, to a large extent thanks to their relations with teachers and other school staff.

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Following these observations and analyses, we formulated a number of recommendations. They consist in a reasoned critique of the « combined » processes[13] (involving the school institution, students and their parents, and youth group social life) causing absenteeism, discouragement and loathing for school. By making students' presence the object

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[13] *Cf.* Millet M., Thin D., 2005, *Ruptures scolaires. L'école à l'épreuve de la question sociale*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.

of an agreement, by acknowledging that earlier curricular decisions have been botched, and by focusing on academic learning – which tends to be given the back seat, behind rule compliance – and by modifying in-house regulations in accordance with that, these recommendations tend toward developing relations with students in which they are viewed as consumers of an educational public service. They stress team work within the school and contacts with outside partners, the transformation of schools into liveable places integrating concern with the physiological and social needs of both students and personnel and encouraging a sense of belonging, necessary for everyone to be present and concerned. Other recommendations have to do with the need for consideration of such factors as students' personal situations (distance between their home and the school, family responsibilities, work), the time when a juvenile reaches legal majority, and closer relations between students' families and the institution.

Our encounters with the actors set a new dynamic in motion, a process of thinking and distance-taking within the schools, and revealed some professional practices amenable to adjustment. This collective thinking process continued during meetings where the findings of the action research were fed back to the staff. The researchers produced and formulated their analyses on the basis of their own observations and of the actors' discourse. The recommendations, some of which have already begun to be implemented, are mostly the outcome of the researchers' work in close collaboration with several key actors who were particularly interested in this approach.

These recommendations, presented in the final synopsis and discussed in the schools, question some of the « *practical habits* » of the educational teams (such as resorting to exclusion to manage classroom conflicts or the systematic refusal to admit morning latecomers, etc.) They were intended as a contribution to the debate among professionals and to experiments in the prevention of various types of students' absence and dropping out.

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