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A prevention scheme for Paris: the « *Accueil réussite éducative Pelleport* » program¹

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Early school-leaving receives much attention, in the form of prevention and help schemes. Its effects are well known: difficulty in finding employment, isolation and drifting, youths who become delinquents or step up their illegal activities... An action-research program, implemented by Maryse Esterle in collaboration with Thomas Pierre, who was especially in charge of the quantitative aspect of the study and of consulting students' files, was conducted from January 2011 to December 2012 in conjunction with the introduction of the *Accueil réussite éducative Pelleport*, a school achievement helping hand program² (AREP).

AREP and its context

The AREP project, whose activities began in November 2010, is part of the attempt to combat school-dropout by providing help throughout the exclusion period for junior high school (*collège*) students temporarily suspended from schools in the eastern part of Paris, for whom no easily accessible place existed previously. Students temporarily excluded from their *collège* (generally for a week, from Monday to Friday, but sometimes for shorter periods) return to school after the exclusion. Also, those believed to be « at-risk of dropping out » may participate in activities at the AREP on a voluntary basis (after school, in late afternoon, on Wednesdays and during short vacation periods). Facilitators working in these schools monitor students in these situations and organise various activities for them, revolving mostly around academic counselling at the end of their last year there. Action is also aimed at parents, and most recently, after this action-research, at former *collège* students who have definitively dropped out of school.

AREP completes other schemes for temporarily excluded *collège* students, including *Accueil scolaire Torcy* in the 18th arrondissement and the Patay Centre in the 13th. The latter two schemes offer help for students during the exclusionary period, whereas AREP, with four lines of action³, is more ambitious:

Line 1 : remobilizing junior high school students within their establishment and preventing early school-leaving,

Line 2 : remobilising junior high school students within Accueil Pelleport and partner organisations,

Line 3 : helping families,

Line 4 : helping students temporarily excluded from their establishment.

AREP is a multi-partnership scheme within a public interest group for successful education including the State (the Prefecture, the Agency for Social Cohesion, and the National Education Department), the city and *département* of Paris, and the Family Welfare Agency (*Caisse d'allocations familiales*). It is partially funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Interministerial fund for crime prevention. It is located in a reception centre 172 rue Pelleport in Paris's 20th arrondissement and in ten-odd *collèges* in eastern Paris. AREP facilitators are present in these *collèges*.

The action-research was commissioned by the Public interest group (*Groupement d'intérêt public – GIP*) of the Paris school district (*Académie de Paris*).

This action-research was defined as a shared project for reflection and support among researchers and grass-roots actors working together on their intersecting observations and questions: about the adequacy of the scheme with respect to its goals and to the characteristics of these youths, relations with the schools, training of counsellors, relations with parents, etc. This action-research included encounters with the promoters of the scheme within the Paris school district at regular intervals. A mid-term report was issued in December 2011 and a final report in December 2012.

Are suspended students all drop-outs ?

Early school-leaving is now viewed as a problem to be dealt with at a national and European level. Research and studies on the subject abound.

¹ A school achievement helping hand, *Accueil Réussite éducative Pelleport* is an out-of-school programme meant to provide support to youths experiencing academic, social, family or health difficulties.

² ESTERLE M., (Ed.), THOMAS P., researcher at the Interdisciplinary Institute for Present-day Anthropology (*Institut Interdisciplinaire d'Anthropologie du Contemporain – IIAC*) and researcher at the CESDIP for this research-action), 2011-2012, *Élèves en rupture... Reconstruire sa posture d'élève pour renouer avec la réussite, recherche-action : pour une prévention du décrochage scolaire, accompagnement des professionnels dans les collèges et au lieu ressource rue Pelleport, Paris XX^e, Guyancourt-Paris, CESDIP-FSE-GIP-Académie de Paris.*

³ As defined in the original AREP project.

In France, about 17% of youths leave the academic and vocational secondary schools each year without any diploma. There is general agreement on the need to reduce the number of those whose schooling ends without any diploma, and in fact the numbers have declined over the last 30 years, falling from 30% in 1980 to 17% at the end of the 2000s⁴. Recent directives stress the need to develop measures for the detection, prevention, and treatment of the problem⁵.

Dropping out may also be defined as « a more or less prolonged process (of leaving the school system) which is not necessarily attended by any explicit statement confirming leaving of the school »⁶. « Drop-outs » attend school from time to time and no longer care about learning. They may also be « internal drop-outs », present on the school premises but rarely in the schoolroom and apparently « demotivated ». The latter definitions apply directly to AREP's action, since it is conducted in collaboration with schools, both for temporarily excluded students and for those who participate in « remobilisation » actions.

However, given the elasticity of the second definition of dropping out, and the fact that budgets for either research or action depend on use of the term « school drop-out » in the project heading, students come to be defined as « drop-outs » whenever they suffer from educational, social, or family problems that disturb their studies, even when school-leaving is not a prospect. This « blanket notion », whose fate is the same as the concept of school violence (which covers a very varied range of facts and situations) produces some confusion among actors in charge of identifying situations and determining what action to implement.

The scores of French students on the triennial PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) surveys show that the huge gap between students with high achievement levels and those with low achievements is widening, an indication of the discrepancy between the overall goal of providing attention for all students and the situations actually observed. A combination of educational and family factors accounts partially for the increase in incidents in *collèges*. Many students actually « drop-out » of the learning process and express their lack of motivation, sometimes to the point of discouragement or feeling that attending school is meaningless, by acting in ways that disturb classes and generate incidents with their classmates and teachers, in classrooms or on the school premises⁷.

These incidents, quantified since the early 1990s under the blanket heading of « school violence », are correlated with the difficulty experienced by the school staff in understanding their origins and coping with them by combining teaching and pedagogy. And yet, many studies point to a link between failure at school and inappropriate or disruptive behaviour⁸.

However, AREP receives some temporarily excluded students who are average, good, or even very good school achievers. The latter are a minority, but they question the « average student » norm, in that their physical or intellectual development may be unusual (what are known as « high potential » students), and their resistance to the school's rules may not stem from a lack of appetite for learning. Other dimensions play a role in preventing or « producing » school leaving and incidents leading to exclusion, and most saliently the

quality of the school climate: a positive, warm classroom atmosphere or conversely, a negative climate, with organisational problems, teachers insufficiently committed to helping problem students, or for whom learning difficulties are tantamount to ill will⁹. These factors must be taken into account if we are to understand students who are temporarily excluded and/or monitored to prevent dropping out.

Consideration of the above-mentioned factors shows that youths themselves are not intrinsically « at-risk ». Rather, the risk is located in the situations they encounter and in interactions with their peers and the adults with whom they are in contact: their family, school staff, social workers, neighbours, etc. In other words, a student's milieu may « produce » or conversely, reduce early school leaving¹⁰. At the same time, youths have some latitude and participate in these interactions on their own right.

Methodology

This action-research involved:

- observation and analysis of action taken, including meetings with workers at *Accueil Pelleport* and in the *collèges*,
- participation in workshops and other activities organised at *Accueil Pelleport* and in the *collèges*,
- assessment sessions with workers (the AREP supervisory team) and heads of *collèges*,
- review of the students' files so as to determine the broad sociological features: number of students per *collège*, social and educational characteristics, reasons for exclusion, etc.,
- consulting of documents pertaining to the scheme (application dossiers, assessments of time spent at AREP, etc.)
- meetings with youths in the scheme and their parents,
- proposals to improve the activities (recommendations, help in developing educational tools, regular meetings with the supervisory team)

Indicators of the satisfactory progress of the action-research included:

- participation in the action-research of the various categories of persons initially contacted,
- improved cooperation between different actors dealing with students and their families (and especially between AREP and the *collèges*),
- the search for means of reinforcing the efficiency of aid within and outside *Accueil Pelleport*,
- reflection on how to evaluate the action undertaken and the changes observed.

Externalising « special cases »

Faced with large numbers of students with widely differing academic levels, adjustment to school norms, their own commitment to and the involvement of their family and milieu in schooling, the educational system has developed « satellites » revolving around the core institution, aimed at handling those students who do not live up to its expectations or who « deserve more » than the education and training offered in conventional *collèges*. They address both « excellent » students (boarding schools for outstanding students) and « problem » or « disruptive » students (« bridge facilities », educational rehabilitation facilities). The amount of time spent in these schemes is variable, ranging from a few weeks to several months.

Contrary to the declared intentions of the authorities, then, the traditional school takes care of the « standardised » student and delegates the management of those on either end of the range of academic achievement and merit to peripheral orga-

nisations. The development of schemes to help excluded students should be viewed in this perspective, with « peripheral » treatment of particularly short duration in this case.

Temporary exclusions: spotty data

At the national level, there is no quantitative data on temporary or definitive exclusions from high schools and junior high schools. Our investigation of the Paris school district did not yield any convincing figures on the subject. Nor is the number and location of schemes or facilities for excluded students known or are they subjected to official regulations. There seem to be many such schemes, for *collège* students only, developed, increasingly, by towns, associations, social centres and so on. They are revealing of the growing trend toward partnerships between schools and achievement-oriented and citizens' groups-

⁴ *Les déchiffreurs de l'éducation*, <http://www.cahiers-pedagogiques.com/blog/lesdechiffreurs>.

⁵ *Bulletin Officiel de l'Éducation Nationale* (BOEN) n° 23, 4 June 2009, official instruction on plans for monitoring and providing support for school drop-outs (9 February 2011), reference persons in *collèges* (December 2012), implementation of the FOQUALE scheme (March 2013).

⁶ GUIGUE M., 1998, Peut-on définir le décrochage ?, in BLOCH M.C., GERDE B., *Les lycéens décrocheurs*, Lyon-Paris, Chronique Sociale, 25-38.

⁷ PÉPIN P.Y., 2012, Les dispositifs relais : performances et paradoxes, *Revue de l'Association Française des Acteurs*

de l'Éducation, 1 (article downloadable on the Internet site : <http://www.education-revue-afae.fr/pagint/revue/articleLibre.php?ctype=contrib>).

⁸ GOÉMÉ Ph., HUGON M.A., TABURET Ph., 2012, *Le décrochage scolaire, des pistes pédagogiques pour agir*, Scéren, CNDP, CRDP, Collection « Repères pour Agir », 13.

⁹ POTVIN P., FORTIN L., MACOTTE D., DESLANDES R., 2004, *Guide de prévention du décrochage scolaire*, Montréal, Centre de Transfert pour la Réussite Éducative du Québec, Section Enseignante, 3.

¹⁰ AREP is aimed at students who do not suffer from any handicap or medically diagnosed « behavioural disorder ». Although some educators working for the Department of Judicial Protection of Juveniles or in specialised prevention may work with some of these youths, this is no requisite for their eligibility.

inspired schemes, and indicative of the will to avoid leaving excluded students to their own devices, the goal being twofold: to keep them under control and perhaps even to prevent troublemaking¹¹ and to provide « educational continuity » during the suspension period.

Until now, helper schemes for temporarily excluded *collège* students have rarely been evaluated. As far as we know, there are two main types of schemes:

- facilities that take in suspended students for a few days (usually 5, or one school week) and offer school-like activities (work that may or may not be provided by teachers or chief educational advisers [*conseillers principaux d'éducation – CPE*]) along with reflection about the act that brought on suspension, and occasionally contacts with parents, while maintaining relations with *collèges*;

- schemes combining help for suspended students with « drop-out prevention » for volunteer, non-excluded students, the proclaimed purpose being to develop interaction with the staff of the students' particular schools and to seek parental involvement. AREP belongs in this diversified approach category. The idea is to set youths entering the Paris educational achievement scheme on a « path » so as to ensure continuity for AREP action. As of June 2012, however, few students had participated.

How suspension functions

Whereas there are no official texts regulating helper facilities for the temporarily excluded as such, some directives¹² do define the main rules governing suspensions:

- the content of activities during the suspension period must have an educational dimension;
- learning must continue during the exclusionary period,
- this continuity must be provided by close collaboration with teachers, who must provide and then correct schoolwork to be done during the exclusionary period,
- the modalities of returning to school must be examined in detail with the school staff.

The *BOEN* emphasizes the risk of drop out when these rules are not observed.

AREP in action. The findings of our action-research

As the head of the academic section, in charge of the scheme, put it: « Suspension cannot be an industry, with *Accueil* as a subcontractor »¹³.

Our hypothesis was that cooperation and exchanges around the educational and pedagogical practices of school staff and AREP workers (mainly the permanent staff and people running workshops) is an inescapable requisite if AREP is to be something other than a facility for getting

rid of those students too troublesome for the conventional *collège*, and that offers them no prospect of in-depth change.

Students in the AREP scheme

The 23 *collèges* within the intervention « perimeter » of AREP did not all make use of the scheme: according to the assessment at the end of May 2011, close to half of the 152 temporarily excluded students attending AREP came from 5 out of 23 schools. The same discrepancy was found during the late 2011-2012 period.

According to the files examined, 210 temporarily excluded students were seen at the Pelleport facility in 2010-2011. In all, during that same school year, those schools sent 313 suspended students to the three centres (Pelleport, Torcy and Patay). In 2011-2012, 173 students were received at Pelleport, 149 were the object of « remobilisation » action within *collèges* (the figure for this category is not known for 2010-2011).

At first the rule at AREP was a five-day reception of students, but the rule is now more flexible and students are taken in for two to five days, since some schools suspended youths for five days so they could be sent to AREP, although the offence committed did not warrant that long an exclusion, *a priori*.

For the two years of action-research, data from the students' files are as follows:

General information:

- they tend to be from « underprivileged » background,
- they have foreign citizenship or foreign origin,
- ¾ are boys.

Family background:

- most live with one parent (16% have two « legal guardians »).

Schooling:

- 1/3 had been suspended previously,
- they are behind at school (1 year),
- 2/3 of students are in the 2nd and 3rd year of junior high school,
- the academic level is variable, and tends to be low.

From one year to the next the *collèges* making use of AREP are not the same. No basis was found for the hypothesized correlation between social background, frequency of incidents and the number of students sent to AREP. Applications for admission tend to depend on the presence of a facilitator in the school, AREP/school staff mutual acquaintanceship, and the geographic proximity of the school to the Pelleport facility.

Expectations of collèges

The protocol for receiving suspended students includes a document in which the head of the school states the reason for exclusion. Most students, it was found, were suspended for incidents involving schoolmates or the school staff: « *Was violent with a schoolmate and threatened a teacher* » (boy, 4th year), or for general behaviour: « *25.5 unexplained half-day absences, lateness: 20 times in the first three months, disrespectful behaviour, foul, insolent language* » (boy, 1st year), or both: « *Doesn't listen to the physical education and*

sports teacher, chews gum, pretends to throw it but actually swallows it, plays truant from classes. Chronic disturber, absenteeism in all subjects » (boy, 2nd year).

The school's expectations mostly pertain to obeying the establishment rules, a requisite for academic achievement: « *F. needs to be brought into line, and to be brought to realize the absolute need to comply with his teachers' demands, the necessities of school life, and above all the school rules. This is all for his own good* » (boy, 3rd year).

Other reasons for suspension are not quite clear, such as « *Sleeps during classes* » (boy, 4th year), or involve so-called atypical students, whose incomprehensible behaviour disconcerts the personnel, although they are not violent or in open conflict, and do well in class.

Some files also contain reports reflecting a large variety of heterogeneous expectations as to discipline, personal maturity, participation in guidance at the end of the 4th year, relations with classmates, etc. These expectations, impossible to meet in a few days, indicate the extent of the issues evidenced in schools and the lack of tools for tackling them. Both in the *collèges* and in AREP, most of the incidents described by the staffs reflect insufficiently institutionalised interactions¹⁴, with students acting in school as they would on the streets with their peers, whereas the educational staffs demand that they respect norms that are meaningless for them.

AREP activities

AREP workers have devised a schedule revolving around several activities and workshops for developing these youths' ability to express themselves and « working on their behaviour ». Parents are seen at the beginning of their child's presence at AREP (to make contact) and at the end, for evaluation. Evaluation is done daily, with the youths, and again at the end of the week. The schedule is adjusted to the length of the youth's stay.

Effects on suspended students

In June 2012, heads of *collèges* did not notice any change in « behaviour » (with respect to school norms) or in achievement following a stint at AREP. AREP workers, on the other hand, noted that although some students remained « hyperactive » and « hard to manage », others did not act the same way at *Accueil Pelleport* as in school. They were relatively attentive, participated in the activities offered and particularly appreciated the daily assessments of the day's activities.

The conditions at AREP are not the same as at school: the staff is not the same, students are in small groups, they learn different things, they spend very short periods there. Those conditions that had generated disruptive behaviour at school are completely modified and it is not at all surprising that most students develop different behaviour within this scheme, as compared to their usual *collège* surroundings, nor that they hardly change their behaviour when they return to the old setting, es-

¹¹ DOUAT É., 2007, La construction de l'absentéisme scolaire comme problème de sécurité intérieure dans la France des années 1990-2000, *Déviance et Société*, 31, 2, 149-171.

¹² *Bulletin Officiel de l'Éducation Nationale*, special issue n° 6, 25 August 2011.

¹³ LEFEUVRE H., (Ed.), 2012, *Élèves en rupture, renouer avec la réussite*, Paris, CRDP/FSE, 10.

¹⁴ DUBET F., 2002, *Le déclin de l'institution*, Paris, Seuil.

pecially in the case of those who are the most estranged from school norms.

« Taking a little breather »: does this reveal AREP's function?

The need for teachers to « take a little breather » is frequently heard in interviews and informal talks about temporarily excluded students. During the first two years of AREP's functioning, teachers did not give any homework for these students, contrary to the *Bulletin Officiel* directives. Some students have learnt so little that the continuity demanded in the directives seems quite illusory. One principal wondered whether catching up on courses was really worthwhile for students who « have been pretending to pay attention for so long ».

In other words, according to heads of *colleges*, some students arriving in the first year need special attention to be brought up to the level required to pursue their studies, barring which they « can't keep pace » in the classroom and are constantly punished¹⁵. But the principal of one school points out that teachers should – but do not – have special skills for coping with these situations. Some are incapable of handling classes which do indeed include some « problem » students but are managed easily by more experienced teachers, thus indicating one limit to educational and pedagogical action in schools: the need for professional training and skills, given the heterogeneity of school populations.

As of June 2012, there was no real organisation of the modalities of returning to school, and this question continued to be the blind spot in the scheme. Similarly, the blind spot within *colleges* is the (non-) participation of teachers in the modalities of exclusion and their lack of information on the scheme.

The partitioning of activities and of decision-making within schools may in fact result in the suspension of a student without his teachers being informed. The latter are given no information or explanation of his absence or when he will return, so that they punish him when he returns after a week of exclusion during which he has been « working on his behaviour ».

Facilitators

The hypothesis that AREP functions as a « relief » structure is reinforced by the situation of the fifteen-odd facilitators working at AREP and in *colleges*, and supposed to be the catalysts of changes in students' behaviour and in pedagogical and educational practices in schools.

One constant, with respect to facilitators, is their precarious status. Some have « one-time integration contracts » or are civic ser-

vice volunteers (in 2012-2013), and all function under poorly paid part-time contracts covering a few months, renewable for short periods. The outcome is that these facilitators soon look for other work and AREP officials are unable to form an ongoing team susceptible of gaining in experience and skills over time.

Facilitators working in schools change often, sometimes in the course of the school year. This causes a hiatus in interventions and produces weariness in *college* heads. The initial training of facilitators is quite variable, and many hardly have any experience of educational action aimed at « problem » youths, and are unacquainted with the school milieu and the reasons for lack of motivation, or with the incidents susceptible of causing suspension. And yet they are in charge of working toward changing pedagogical and educational practices and serving as go-between in relations between students, AREP and the *college*. Their presence (and their work with AREP) is generally appreciated, however, by school supervisory teams and chief educational advisers. This corroborates the idea that school officials are eager to have contacts and help in evaluating situations.

Our observations led us to analyse helper schemes for suspended students as an arrangement for the school's « unwanted ». As of the end of our action-research, schools tended more to use the scheme to subcontract the modification of behaviour deemed unacceptable than to work with AREP on transforming that behaviour. This does not by any means question the desire of the AREP officials and staff to reverse that trend and to make the time spent at AREP a time for « setting the change process in motion », an expression we suggested to them; but this requires that *colleges* truly engage in an in-depth reflection on their organization and pedagogical and educational practices.

« Remobilisation » actions aimed at *college* students « at risk of dropping out » are not enmeshed in as serious contradictions as those aimed at the suspended, since most take place within the schools, in closer collaboration with the school staff. They may raise the problem of each person's role, however. Guidance at the end of the 4th year, for instance, may elicit debates as to the capacity and skills of the outside actors called in to advise students, whereas there are trained professionals for that (guidance counsellor psychologists (*conseillers d'orientation psychologues* – COP)).

Our recommendations, formulated at the end of our report, had been discussed for the most part with the AREP supervisory team. They were as follows:

- Constitution of a team of AREP workers composed of a stable group of trained facilitators;
- Establishment of stronger ties with *colleges* including their involvement in the preparation and actual course of the students' stay and their reinstatement in school

(especially in the classroom, with teachers and classmates);

- Establishment of a collective reflection process involving the working team and the commissioners, as to AREP's missions in conjunction with its partners;
- Development of internal evaluation on AREP's work (follow-up of cohorts, evaluation criteria);
- The need for more thought on relations with parents.

Conclusion

Facilities taking in temporarily excluded students bring serious political and partnership stakes into play. They endorse the « subcontracting » to outside establishments of students who do not fall within the norms, in an attempt to solve the contradiction between the proclaimed fight against early school leaving and actual practices consisting of throwing those students believed to be at greatest risk out of schools. They are an adjunction to the numerous schemes for identifying, counting, and handling school drop-out, which are rarely and only partially evaluated and whose objectives aim more at coping with students who already have problems than at working to prevent the phenomenon by thoroughly modifying the educational system.

The logic of exclusion/punishment, which is practically routine, is tantamount to throwing these students out and prevails over a logic that would consist of coping with conflicts or theoretically relatively incomprehensible situations within the school itself. This search for solutions would not necessarily involve punishment and might in some cases include a partnership with other specialists (educators, psychologists, and so on).

Instead of expending efforts to « repair the damage » caused by the present organisation of the school system, it seems preferable for schools to take action involving rethinking the objectives and organisation of schools, pedagogical and educational practices and teacher training. Some examples of this may already be encountered at the school or classroom level.

Our recommendations during this action-research aimed at clarifying the goals of the scheme, questioned the means implemented for the inclusion of students and encouraged a multi-partner reflection around the practice of exclusion from school. AREP officials introduced some modifications in their original functioning during this project, thus demonstrating the value and fecundity of joint action co-involving researchers and field workers.

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¹⁵ Many researchers have observed this type of sequence (cf. MILLET, THIN, 2005, *Ruptures scolaires*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France ; DOUAT É., 2011, *L'école buissonnière*, Paris, La Dispute ; ESTERLE-HEDIBEL M., 2007, *Les élèves transparents*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion).