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Early school leaving: towards a common system of measurement

Many measures, involving a large number of actors, have been put in place to fight early school leaving. Each scheme or programme has its own system of counting, suited to its own particular remit, and the figures obtained vary by as much as 100%. There are two possible ways of alleviating these difficulties: fostering cooperation between institutions and improving the early identification of at-risk pupils by adopting a sub-regional approach.

work territories
evaluation individuals
methodology
apprenticeship dropouts
regions integration

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Céreq's Recommendations

Harmonise the systems for observing and measuring early school leaving.

The reduction of early exits, or dropouts, from the education system has become a priority in Europe (Strategy Europe 2020) as it has in France. This is reflected in the 2009 youth action plan *Agir pour la Jeunesse* as well as in the proliferation of initiatives launched by the Ministry of Education in partnership with the Ministry of Employment (local platforms, national workshops for the exchange of practices and experiences organised by the Fonds d'expérimentation pour la jeunesse/Fund for Experimental Youth Projects, interministerial monitoring and information exchange system, etc.).

From individual withdrawal to official statistic

According to M. Guigue (cf. Further Reading), early departure from the education system denotes *'the more or less lengthy process [of withdrawal] that is not necessarily acknowledged by any explicit information confirming departure from the institution'*. Thus it is different from quitting, which is an openly declared, voluntary departure, and exclusion, which is an administrative decision. *'Early school leaving'* is confirmation of a pupil's gradual *'disaffection'* with the education system. Prior to this,

chronic absenteeism and temporary or permanent exclusion from school are symptoms but may also be a trigger. The consequences for individuals of these early departures from the education system are serious, since young people without qualifications experience the greatest difficulties in establishing themselves in an already tight labour market and are particularly at risk of falling into 'precarity'. Some researchers prefer to speak of 'withdrawal on the inside' in order to highlight the complexity of the interactions and avoid hastily labelling an entire category of young people. Nevertheless, early school leavers, or dropouts, constitute the hard core of those young people who leave school without any qualifications. When they enter the labour market, it is too late to intervene. Since the phenomenon is by its very nature difficult to capture, other than by measuring absenteeism, a minimum level of qualification has been adopted as a threshold below which a young person is deemed to be a 'dropout' (cf. box on following page).

This definition has the merit of clarity. Nevertheless, if applied strictly, an absence of qualifications would include failure in examinations for the CAP vocational qualification and in the baccalaureate, regardless of the prior educational record. This approach marks a break with the classification of skill levels that has been in use since 1967, according to which young people are recognised as having a skill if they have completed the final year ●●●

Box 1 • A definition to sharpen the detection of early school leaving

Since a decree of 31 December 2010, the Education Code stipulates the minimum level of qualification that any pupil or apprentice must attain (art. D.313-59 and L.313-7) :

- a general baccalaureate
- or a vocational qualification that appears in the National List of Vocational Qualifications and is classified at level V or IV in the Interministerial Classification of Education and Training Levels [the French NQF – National Qualifications Framework].

The EDUSCOL ministry site adds: **'Any young person who leaves an initial education or training system without the minimum level of qualification required by law is a dropout.'**

(<http://eduscol.education.fr/pid23269-cid48490/analyse-du-phenomene.html>)

●●● of preparation for the qualification, even if they have not passed the final examination. It might be asked whether this matching of skill levels and qualifications will have any validity in future outside of the fight against early school leaving, particularly when it comes to employers' recruitment practices.

Measuring the scale of the problem: the statistical apparatus

According to INSEE's labour force surveys, of the 700,000 young people who leave the education system in France each year, 17 % - no fewer than 122,000 individuals - do so without obtaining any secondary school leaving certificate. A school leaver without any qualifications may be identified and offered support by several institutions: his or her school or various other organisations offering support, information and guidance.

The first count, conducted by the regional education authorities (*rectorat*), often involves compiling a list of those judged to have left initial education early. The count is conducted by identifying those pupils who were enrolled in year n-1 but who are no longer enrolled in year n: these young people are not attending a Ministry of Education school, not on a training programme organised by any other ministry and not on an apprenticeship programme. A proportion of these early leavers are young people who did not obtain a place on an education or training programme at the beginning of the school year because they were not allocated to the programme of their choice since there were no places available, particularly in the vocational high schools.

A second type of count, this time carried out at school level, is carried out as part of the efforts to prevent early exits from the education system. A record is kept of repeated absences, with a certain margin of tolerance around the stipulated threshold of four half-days per month and some leeway for judging the credibility of the explanations provided by the pupils. These records are submitted to the education authority and are used to produce a long-term dataset.

A third type of count is carried out by the Ministry of Education's specialist departments and units. Following the establishment of education monitoring units (*cellules de veille éducative*) in every education and training district, each education authority's information and guidance department (*service académique d'information et d'orientation*) records the number of interviews conducted with potential early leavers identified by their schools. The general integration task force (*Mission générale d'insertion* or MGI), which has specific responsibility for young people in very great difficulty, then takes over, particularly in the case of young people who have been out of the education system for less than a year but are not on a training programme or in temporary employment. In the academic year 2007-2008, the MGIs interviewed 50,190 young people who had either left school early or were at risk of doing so.

These various statistical sources managed by the Ministry of Education are supplemented by records of the numbers of young people who have been in contact with an advisor from the local employment information and advice services for young people (*mission locale*). In principle, these young people should already have been seen at an information and guidance centre (*centre d'information et d'orientation*, or CIO) and should not be referred to the *mission locale* until they have been out of the education system for at least one year (cf. box).

This is far from being the case. In 2008, 205,000 young people without the CAP-BEP (the basic vocational qualification) or who quit before the end of upper secondary school had an initial interview with the *mission locale*; of them, 135,600 had left the education system less than a year previously. This figure may seem high; in fact, since the *missions locales'* annual reports are compiled for each calendar year, they cover two school years. Furthermore, the leaving dates are based on statements made in interviews and not on official records.

Finally, a fourth type of count is carried out by the apprentice training centres (CFAs), agricultural colleges and private educational establishments; they have their own counting methods and submit their figures to the education authorities in various forms depending on the region.

The range of different counting methods in use has been reduced by gathering the results together and combining the various lists obtained. To that end, an interministerial mechanism for harmonising the various data collection methods – the Interministerial Information Exchange System (SIEI) - was put in place in February 2011. It brings together the statistics gathered by the Ministries of Education, Employment and Agriculture, which will eventually be joined by those from the Ministries of Defence and Maritime Affairs. Seven lists are compiled in the course of three successive sorting processes in order to identify, firstly, leavers who have not enrolled again, then those who have

CFA • Centre de formation d'apprentis – Apprentice training centre

CIO • Centre d'information et d'orientation – Information and guidance centre

CNIL • Commission nationale informatique et libertés – French data protection authority

MGI • Mission générale d'insertion – General integration task force

SIEI • Système interministériel d'échange d'informations – Interministerial information exchange system

changed school and finally those who have moved to a different regional education authority, from the public to the private sector (or vice versa) or to a programme provided by a different ministry. After checking those who have been referred to the MGIs or *missions locales*, a final list of 'missing dropouts' is compiled.

This system, which is more comprehensive than its predecessors, produces a higher estimate, up to 254,000 before the elimination of some double counting, which is double the current estimate.

How do 122,000 dropouts become 254,000 ?

Such discrepancies are the result neither of technical difficulties nor errors in calculation. By analogy with the unemployment statistics gathered by the Ministry of Labour, INSEE and the ILO, they stem largely from the fact that each agency involved uses a method of measurement suited to its own particular remit.

Firstly, it is the task of educational establishments to prevent all early leaving. The probability of young people dropping out varies very considerably depending on the establishment and pathway in question. Absenteeism can be as high as 30 % in apprentice training centres and vocational high schools. However, it is not certain that the propensity to signal is the same in each type of establishment, in view of the advertising effects and the risk of stigmatisation for those most exposed to it.

Secondly, the objective behind the creation of networks of guidance and integration services and organisations is to improve the circulation of information on dropouts and to identify them as early as possible. This measure, which is intended to shift the thrust of policy from mere data processing towards prevention, results in a higher figure by virtue of increased vigilance. Nevertheless, this effect is offset by a contrary trend, since the collective efforts that have been made in this area in recent years have tended to reduce the figures.

Thirdly, regulatory guidelines lay down the chronological order in which a young person is to be monitored by the various educational establishments, services and organisations referred to above. Thus once a pupil had been identified by his or her school, the baton passes to the CIO or to the MGI and then only after at least a year to the *mission locale*.

At the same time, a number of different preventive services and programmes exist alongside each other, including the integration support groups (*groupes d'aide à l'insertion* or GAINs) at establishment level, the education monitoring units (*cellules de veille éducative*) in every education and training district and the Succeed in Education

programmes (*Programmes de réussite éducative*) that form part of urban policy. Now a young person may decide, on impulse, not to follow the prescribed sequence or may be in contact with various services and programmes simultaneously. As a result, certain sources of information are lacking data while others are distorted by double counting.

Fourthly, and finally, the increase in the number of young people who 'disappear' in the course of the school year is due in part to a decision made necessary by the French data protection authority (the *Commission nationale de l'informatique et des libertés*/CNIL). The SIEI, which collects data twice per year between October and March-April, excludes under-16s from the count. However, within the space of 6 months, half of a cohort of 'unrecorded' early leavers under the age of 16 are included in the count simply by virtue of crossing the age threshold. This purely automatic phenomenon is further compounded by the fact that the propensity to drop out increases significantly at this age. It is difficult to put a figure on this bias because the scale of the problem among under-16 year olds, who are in any case obliged by law to attend school, is still a relatively unknown quantity.

How do we find a way out of this tangle that goes beyond the successive refinements that have eliminated the double counting? It seems that, while young dropouts readily switch agencies and hence institutions (a form of channel hopping?), making them difficult to track, they do not change locality very often. Consequently, it should be possible to take advantage of the regional or territorial dimension when gathering data for the count.

A sub-regional approach to early school leaving

Three statistical indicators could be used, as demonstrated by the example of one regional education authority (*académie*) among others, namely Lower Normandy.

The first is the number of individuals identified by their schools, grouped together at the level

The education monitoring units, staffed by teachers and guidance specialists, seek to limit early leaving from the education system.

The integration support groups, run by the MGI, work towards the same objectives within an educational establishment.

*An issue of *Bref* on the social risks of early drop-out is to be published in 2012.*

Box 2 • Educational establishments and their responsibilities

French education law (the Education Code) places three obligations on heads of education and training establishments with regard to young dropouts:

- responsibility for the young person for a year following departure from the education system;
- compilation and circulation of young persons' details 'to individuals and organisations designated by the state's representative in the department', in collaboration with the school inspectorate, and to the local employment information and guidance services (Art. L313-7) ;
- a guidance interview with the family (art. L313-8).

of the canton (a territorial subdivision of the *département*). The education authorities (*rectorat*) and professionals generally gather their data at a higher level (education districts, employment catchment areas, etc.). This practice makes sense, since it coincides with various professional practices, including the allocation of certain teachers. It also coincides with the action areas of the district support groups (*Groupes d'appui de bassin*), whose task is to organise and coordinate the monitoring units at school level. However, the canton level has the advantage of being more accurate. In any given territory, this indicator draws attention to a limited number of schools and trouble spots. Thus in Lower Normandy, three quarters of school leavers without qualifications are concentrated in just 10% of the 147 cantons. Furthermore, half of these are concentrated in three *communes*, one in each of the departments that make up the region. Thus this indicator suggests that early school leaving is primarily an urban phenomenon.

The second indicator puts this pinpointing effect into context. The number of dropouts per canton is compared with the total number of pupils enrolled in all education and training establishments, including general, technical and vocational high schools, both private and state, the senior class in lower secondary schools and apprentice training centres. This comparison changes the picture completely: only three urban cantons feature in the two lists of the most affected cantons. The rest are all in rural areas.

This finding has serious implications for public policies, since the measures best suited to tackling the problems will not be the same in all areas. While the provision of specific additional classes may well meet needs in urban areas, it is likely that targeted actions, based on the establishment of more closely knit regional networks, will be required. These actions may involve cooperation with social workers and the shared facilities of the local employment information and advice services for young people (*missions locales* and CIOs) in order to provide opportunities at local level for early leavers to resume their education.

These two indicators are both based on annual flows of pupils leaving school without qualifications. There is no data on the 'stocks of dropouts', particularly since the French

Box 3 • An experiment to improve the monitoring of early school leaving

A public interest group public, attached to the Caen education authority and involving various partners across the Lower Normandy region, launched an experimental project with the aim of intensifying the fight against early school leaving. To this end, a software package for identifying and monitoring school dropout in the Lower Normandy region was developed. The project was evaluated by Céreq's associated regional centre in Lower Normandy.

The new software was intended to provide technical support for the coordination process by enabling the actors to contact each other more quickly, thereby accelerating the provision of support for the young people concerned. Although the software has not been finalised, coordination has been improved as part of a joint review of the identification and monitoring of school dropouts. Interviews on changes in practices have been conducted and the project has given rise to a root-and-branch analysis of the identification of school dropouts within the region.

data protection authority has ordered users of the SIEI to destroy the lists of names within two years. A third indicator can be used to estimate the stock, namely the total number of young people not in education and without qualifications, i.e. those seeking employment. This population, like holders of level V qualifications (CAP-BEP), is the least mobile geographically and can therefore be fairly easily identified at local level. In the case of Lower Normandy, two out of three of these young people are in the cantons with the highest concentrations of school dropouts, which confirms the sedimentation effect of exits without qualifications. Furthermore, the other cantons cited are more affected by deindustrialisation and a negative migration balance among the economically active population, particularly in rural areas.

This sub-regional analysis shows that while the most visible part of the problem tends to be concentrated in urban areas, early school leaving is by its very nature difficult to identify, particularly in rural areas or, more generally, in small schools.

Thus focusing the debate on a simple count of the number of dropouts is misleading. If the flows of early school leavers are to be reduced, then the first priority must be to improve cooperation between the various institutions concerned, a process that is already very advanced. The identification and tracking process should also be improved through the adoption of a sub-regional approach to early school leaving and low qualifications. ■

Further reading

- Décrochages scolaires. L'école en difficulté*, C. Blaya, éditions De Boeck Universités, Bruxelles, 2010.
- Absentéisme, déscolarisation, décrochage scolaire, les apports des recherches récentes*, M. Esterle-Hédibel, *Déviance et Société*, 1(30), 2006.
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