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**Public and private schooling in France :  
an investigation into family choice**

Gabriel Langouët and Alain Léger

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**Public and private schooling in France : an investigation into family choice**

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Since the end of the 1970s, more than a third of all French pupils have attended private schools either continuously or temporarily. The private sector appeared as a second chance, but one that was not seized in equal proportions by all social classes and was thus a source of new inequalities. Moreover, it appeared that although pupil recruitment in the public sector was more democratic, the private sector had more success in equalizing results and scholastic careers. Today school switching continues to increase : more than 40% of pupils attend or have attended the private sector at one point in time and almost one family in two makes use of it for at least one child. In this respect, we have observed important similarities in the school careers of parents and children : some families remain loyal to one of the two sectors while others switch between sectors. Ideologically-based choices seem to be on the decline : the main reason families use the private sector is to improve their childrens' education. There remain, however, important regional differences in provision and use of the private sector.

In the matter of schooling, France is a specific case : coexisting with public — that is, state-run — secular education is a large private sector dominated, especially since the 1959 law known as the *loi Debré*, by state-subsidized and state-supervised Catholic education establishments. For more than a century this situation has been the subject of sharp disagreement and debate between the respective partisans of the two sectors.

Public opinion and the various social groups, however, seem characterized at present by much more nuanced attitudes and behaviour ; they tend to view the two sectors more in terms of complementary than opposition. This observation has been the basis of our ongoing effort to analyse more closely the relations in France between state and school, between public and private education.

The research field is vast ; it was not completely unexplored when we began our investigations. Existing research had already brought to light several

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profound changes. As early as 1972 Lucie Tanguy showed the structural changes in private education that had been brought about by its status, identified in the law *Debré*, as a “private service of public utility” (Tanguy 1972). In 1981 Antoine Prost (1981) noted changes in the function of private schooling : though its main vocation remained religious instruction, it was being used more and more as a “second chance” by parents of pupils encountering difficulties in public school. In a study published at the same time, Robert Ballion (1982) observed changes in families' behaviour ; he underlined the increased demand for education and interpreted it as a “strategy” comparable to those used by an informed actor : families sought to acquire education as if it were any other consumer good.

Our own longstanding interest in and attachment to this research theme is due in great part to these briefly evoked historical and sociological analyses (and to a few others we do not have the space to discuss), but it is also a result of our more direct observation of two series of social facts.

First, it appeared from our earliest investigations that there was a major discrepancy between the clear-cut, often inflexible positions expressed by those in charge of the two “camps” on the one hand and the opinions of “users” of the two sectors on the other. Among the first group, there were those for whom private education was nothing more nor less than Catholic education (95% of private French schools under state contract are Catholic, but this does not mean that their pupils are required to follow religious instruction) and who rejected the idea of any public funding of private schooling in the name of state neutrality : “public funds for public schooling ; private funds for private schooling”. There were also those who saw no difference between defending freedom of education and freedom itself, thus suggesting that there was no freedom to be had in state schools. However, our observations of developments in public opinion, based mainly on surveys (which must of course be interpreted with caution), show that the opinions of family users have become less and less clear-cut and partisan. Today the majority of them, including the left-leaning electorate, accept state subsidizing of private schooling, and parents are vigorously demanding the right to choose both schooling sector and individual school.

Second, there were the major 1984 demonstrations in favour of private education. These led to the withdrawal of then Education Minister Alain Savary's project to fully integrate private education into the public service — and to a change in government. In fact, in the matter of state/school relations, the end result was the full maintenance of state aid to private schooling as provided for 25 years earlier by the “*loi Debré*”, though the form that aid took has been slightly modified by the new decentralization laws. We have underlined several times that even though this powerful mobilization in favour of private schooling was encouraged in part by forces opposed to the value system associated with public services in France, it was in no way a mobilization against public schooling, but rather a claim — supported by the great majority — to the right to choose. This of course implies maintaining the two sectors, understood more

as complementary than competitive or antagonistic. Nor can the equally large manifestations ten years later in 1994, this time in favour of public education, be understood as a mobilization against private schooling. It may not be misguided to think that the same types of families — perhaps even the same families themselves — may have defended the two types of schooling with equal sincerity.

On the one hand, convergence of expressed opinions ; on the other, moments of strong social tension — here was certainly a field for sociologists to investigate, with the purpose of reaching a better understanding of real developments, questioning received ideas on the issue, and perhaps even finding grounds to reject many well anchored but false ideas.

### **Do the two sectors simply coexist or are they complementary ?**

Our analysis was conducted from a study of statistical data made available to us by the *Direction de l'Évaluation et de la Prospective* department (DEP) of the Ministry of National Education. It led to the following observations :

- After a general decrease in private school draw in the 1960s and 70s, the rate of enrolment in the private sector remained constant and even increased for secondary school at least until 1985 ;
- The private education enrolment rate was tending to increase in most of the school districts where those rates had been weakest, suggesting that this sector was being chosen for reasons other than attachment to religious instruction ;
- Private school enrolment rates progressively increased as pupils moved from elementary to secondary school, suggesting significant numbers of transfers from one sector to the other, especially of older pupils ;
- Social composition varied with sector, with nonetheless a slight compression of the differences between social compositions of same-level school classes observable between 1973 and 1974 and 1984 and 1985 ;
- There was a distinct increase in the number of transfers between public and private schooling. <sup>1</sup>

The two sectors therefore seem to function more and more often as complementary, though each maintains a significant proportion of its specific populations. It seems that many parents go from one sector to the other, particularly when their children are having scholastic difficulties. The reasons for these transfers are not well-known ; we can, however, affirm that the increase in their number shows families' growing attachment to the existence of a double-sector schooling network.

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<sup>1</sup> For further details see Langouët and Léger 1994a.

## Follow-up on samples of pupils ("panels" from 1972-73-74 and 1980) <sup>2</sup>

### *The degree of school switching or "zapping" <sup>3</sup>*

Analysis of the data from the panels confirmed the results established earlier while enabling us to show the degree to which transfer between public and private schooling was being used. In the private sector it appears that "transitory clients" were often more numerous than "loyal" ones. Coming into the 1980s, more than 35% of the generation of pupils used private schooling at some point in their schooling ; we can say therefore that an even greater percentage of families had recourse to private schooling for at least one of their children. Seven to eight years later, the rates of transfer had increased while both "all public" and "all private" scholastic itineraries had decreased. Altogether, more than 37% of pupils used private schooling either permanently or temporarily.

### *Who zaps ?*

Transfer use is linked to clear scholastic difficulties, namely that of being behind other children of the same age. With the exception of first form, the average age of transferring pupils was higher than that of non-transferring pupils.

This phenomenon was unequally spread over social class. Especially in secondary school, transfers are more frequent among the upper classes ; there were very few among children from working-class backgrounds. The upper classes' recourse to the private sector in cases of child's failure in school thus works to accentuate socially-based inequalities in scholastic performance.

Seven years later, the strategies of the different social classes appeared to be

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<sup>2</sup> "Panels" are samples of pupils who were followed throughout their schooling by the Ministry of Education. Only such a longitudinal method can furnish dependable statistics, enabling us, for example, to relate success on the *baccalauréat* exam to the whole generation that entered the system rather than just those who "made it" to *classe terminale* (the last year of *lycée*). Moreover, these panels made it possible to collect large numbers of real life stories, and to be statistically representative of mainland France. The 1972-73-74 panel represents the 37,437 pupils who entered first form in those three years ; they were observed for the succeeding eleven years, and we were able to collect data for approximately 1000 variables for each of them. In total, the three panels used retrace the scholastic itineraries of some 80,000 pupils (cf. Langouët and Léger 1994a).

<sup>3</sup> "Zapping" refers to movement back and forth between public and private schooling ; pupils who change sectors one or more times in the course of their schooling are "zappers".

changing, being reorganized, namely among tipper managers, whose strategy development ran counter to the other social groups. The social compositions of the two sectors had been unequally modified, reflecting an undeniable democratization of the private sector, though it is true that recruiting in this sector remains more elitist.

### *Where do pupils do best ?*

Private schooling has generally reduced differences in pupil performance by social origin within its own ranks. With the exception of farmers' children, who do not seem to do well in private school, children from lower- and lower-middle-class backgrounds do better there. The state was sending massive numbers of workers' children out of the system at the end of second form into the CAPs (short program of technical studies ; see Prost 2000) or apprenticeship programs, whereas in private school a sharply higher proportion of such pupils, with a lower rate of hold backs, were brought all the way to fourth form and even to obtaining the *baccalauréat*. Children of white-collar clerical workers were succeeding even more spectacularly in private school. Seven years later the private sector was still doing better than the public sector at reducing differences in school performance between workers' and upper managers' children. Our conclusion is thus somewhat paradoxical : private schooling is less democratic than public in its initial recruiting but more democratic than public in treatment of pupils, since it enables the small minority of lower- and lower-middle-class families enrolled in it to perform better.

Should we conclude from this that private schooling constitutes a kind of model for democratizing education ? Such an optimistic assessment would be exaggerated and is thus to be avoided, for despite the observed differences in treatment, social segregation in schooling proves a constant whatever the sector studied, especially in the upper level of secondary education, that is, the three forms of *lycée*. The fact that there are clear differences between the sectors must not lead to blanket judgements or an assumption that one sector has resolved all the problems involved in democratization. On the contrary, we should measure the distance yet to be covered and take observed differences for what they are : the sign that the present situation is not inevitable and that both sectors “can do better,” to use a standard comment on French pupils' school reports.

### **Characteristics of family choice**

Based on still more recent data from an investigation in which 5265 families participated, representing more than 14,000 children, our latest research continues and build upon that previously cited (Langouët and Léger 1997).

### *School-switching continues to increase and “fidelity” to decrease*

No doubt the first lesson of this new research is that “zapping” from sector to sector continues to increase, while in both sectors there are fewer entirely loyal users. More than 40% of pupils use private school continuously or temporarily. The differences between pupils by social background have been fully confirmed : blue-collars' and clerical workers' children use private schooling least ; middle managers use it to a medium degree ; upper executives, artisans and retailers use it a great deal ; while farmers make the most use of it proportionally. In confirmation of a former study, zapping remains closely linked to scholastic failure.

### *Still more pronounced family “zapping” and weaker family loyalty*

The essential discovery of this research, however, is that use of both sectors appears to be even more frequent if we measure not in terms of a single child but by studying the scholastic itineraries of all the children in a given family. Study of itineraries of siblings shows that today only one in two families is loyal to public schooling, while only one in 25 is faithful to private schooling.

Almost 49% of families use private schooling either exclusively or partially. This is a crucial result : the private sector is doing very nearly as well as the public, in the sense that nearly one family in two is either sending at least one child to private school or has done so. Fidelity to the public sector, which represents a minority position among farmer, artisan, and retailer families and is tending toward the same for upper manager families, thus remains the majority choice only among middle-class, middle-profession families, clerical workers, and blue collars (though even in these groups it is declining), and among parents with relatively low educational degrees. Among parents with high educational degrees, fidelity to public schooling falls below 50%.

### *Family traditions and changes in them*

Above and beyond these relatively classic social determinants, close ties appear between parents' scholastic itineraries and the schooling choices they make a generation later for their own children. Strong family traditions of loyalty to public or private schooling appear : when both parents have been “faithful” in their own schooling to public or private, they reproduce that fidelity in their children's school itineraries in 75% of cases. When both parents used both sectors, 60% of their children do likewise.

Moreover, mother's and father's scholastic itineraries are identical in 60% of cases, which brings to light dependence between marriage and schooling strategies, since before shaping the future scholastic experience of the children,

“reproduction” presided over choice of spouse or mate in almost two-thirds of cases. From the works of Alain Girard we know several of the social determinants that figure in the initial meeting and choice of a partner (Girard 1974). To these we should now add type of schooling — public or private — of each of the future mates, as we see that it has an important influence on the likelihood of their founding a family together. “Birds of a feather flock together” turns out to be true for scholastic itineraries too.

No doubt this phenomenon alone explains in large part how family schooling traditions will later be reproduced and perpetuated in shaping the scholastic itineraries of future offspring, for in the majority of cases, the children will have only a single reference model — the identical schooling history of their two parents.

We have also discovered more complex forms of loyalty (though these are not surprising in themselves) : a strong correlation between nature of parents' employer(s) — public or private — and childrens' schooling, for example. When the employer is a state or public enterprise, parents are much more likely to send their children to public schools. Conversely, parents working in the private sector are much less likely to do so. This connection seems to work in the other direction : having exclusively public schooling distinctly increases the likelihood that one will later work in the public sector — this holds for both men (44%) and women (51%) — while the numbers fall to less than 26% for men and less than 35% for women if schooling has been exclusively private.

Though secularity and religion are only rarely cited as motivations for choice, we can see that overall loyalty to one sphere or the other — that is, in matters over and beyond schooling — is a matter of strong family traditions that also shape schooling itineraries, professional activity and even choice of partner. The analyses presented here will no doubt enable us to better understand the phenomenon dubbed “the social heredity of civil servants,” which has already been generally studied, namely by Claude Th  lot (1988), assisted by INSEE's “*Formation Qualification Professionnelle*” studies. What is transmitted here is no doubt much more than a simple preference in schooling : it represents a real choice of what the society as a whole should be, with the ideology of public service standing in opposition to liberal ideology. We would fail to understand the intensity of the attachment to private schooling among all the independent occupations — farmers, small business operators, artisans, retailers, members of liberal professions — if we forgot that, above and beyond religious convictions, that attachment reflects the societal values which are the very foundation of these occupational groups' social existence.

But such reproduction of family traditions should not mask the degree to which users go back and forth between public and private schooling, and the increased mixing of school populations : the increase in “zapping” shows that the intersection between public and private spheres of influence is constantly getting larger. Though pronounced reproduction of parents' schooling itinerary models persists, we can also observe a tendency towards the weakening of these models



and their transmission.

*Not the expected reasons for choosing one sector over the other*

The technique of our study also enabled us to better clarify the reasons behind parents' choices. First of all, regardless of itinerary type, ideology-based choices are not frequent. It is true that a significant proportion of parents choosing private schooling do so for religious reasons, while on the side of public schooling we find many more parents attached to secularity ; but such ideology-based choices are in the minority : among those “loyal” to public schooling, only 20% cite secularity, while 27% of those “faithful” to private schooling cite religion.

The main reasons for choosing one type of schooling over the other are in fact strongly tied to the quest for scholastic success, whether this criterion is stated directly or underlies other cited criteria such as teachers' competence or accessibility, emphasis on good manners and behaviour, discipline imposed or overall school environment. It is true that the reasons invoked vary by social category, revealing differences in perceptions of the possibility of choice : working class families often cite schools' proximity and ease of access (namely by public transport) whereas upper class families show themselves much less affected by such concerns and thus freer in their choices. But reasons cited also vary according to sector use : in the same social category, pedagogical, socio-pedagogical, and social-status reasons are much more often cited by “all private” families than “all public” ones and the behaviour of families who “mix” is closer to all-private than all-public ones.

*Pupils' scholastic results and possible explanations for the gaps*

Though pupils' results have been estimated here on the basis of families' statements, we have been able to confirm that there are inequalities in likelihood of success between different social groups by schooling type chosen. Children of low-level white-collar and blue-collar families do better in private schooling, while farmers' children do better in public school. Moreover, private sector users make greater use of their freedom of choice, insisting on scholastic success as their reason for choosing and expressing greater satisfaction with the educational establishment, even when their child does not succeed there.

May we conclude from this that private schools are more conducive to scholastic success ? This is no doubt true, but not uniformly. In some respects, successful pupils resemble each other regardless of schooling sector (as do failing pupils) ; in other respects, pupils in the same sector are similar to each other regardless of how well they do. The “sector effect” explanation would require finer observation of schools, their structures, and specific pedagogic practices.

### *Significant regional differences*

Finally, analysis of regional differences and similarities shows that because families' overall "strategies" are affected by schooling supply, they do not develop according to the same rules — in Nantes, Reims or Paris, for example — and that behaviour in choosing schooling varies by region *within* social categories, with clearly opposed "strategies" involved in choosing public schooling on the one hand and private on the other. Inhabitants of Reims behave much like the French at large. Parisians, on the other hand, better informed, seem a bit "excessive" : in the capital there are stronger sociological differences between public and private, much more "zapping" within a segment of secondary education ; even stronger more clearly defined reasons for choosing one sector over the other ; and, among families of high social status, a more strongly affirmed "distinction," shown in choosing to use private schooling either exclusively or temporarily. Inhabitants of Nantes, meanwhile, often go against the current. In a region where there is as much private schooling as public and therefore more balanced choice, the children of upper managers are more often in public school than is the case in the rest of France and those of the working class more often in private school ; within private schooling the "all privates" are the majority while loyalty to public schooling is sharply weaker, and weaker among children from working-class backgrounds than children of upper managers ; meanwhile those who are loyal to public schooling have a stronger attachment to secularity. In Nantes, then, "distinction" seems to have changed camps and is associated with the choice of public schooling rather than private.

### **Conclusion**

We have indicated changes in family behaviour observable in the last fifteen or so years, and even those from one generation to the next ; families' increasing propensity to use "zapping" as a "second chance," as means of combating scholastic failure, though such usage depends both on parents' social position and own scholastic history — there is indeed both reproduction of parental models and a tendency toward a weakening of these models. We have also made an effort to improve understanding of the reasons why families make the schooling choices they do : regardless of the preferred sector, what is operative in their choice is an attempt to improve children's chances of scholastic success rather than an attachment to either secularity or religious education. This probably explains in large part the regional differences observed. Our most recent research confirms once again the difference in degrees of scholastic achievement by schooling sector, with children of blue-collar families and low-level white-collar families doing better in the private sector. This sector seems to function more democratically than the public one. No doubt such "paradoxical" results have multiple causes, among them a "sector effect" and the variable motivations in families from equivalent social categories by sector chosen. The research field

remains largely open, and there is much work to do if we want to reach a better idea of how to better democratize schooling in France in both sectors.

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