

# TOWARDS A MORE EGALITARIAN SCHOOL: A CONTEXTUALIZED ANALYSIS OF CHANGE<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

School education in French-speaking Belgium has made widespread use of grade retention in managing pupils in difficulties. Since 1995, a number of political initiatives have aimed to reduce grade retention in primary schools, forbidding the repetition of a year within cycles of study and promoting changes in pedagogical practices. The main goal of this reform is to fight the social selection observed with grade retention and to increase equality of opportunity and equality of results at school-leaving. An analysis of primary-level teachers' perceptions and practices highlights how much this reform conflicts with teachers' spontaneous conceptions of equality. In this way, different meanings of equality are presented and discussed in this paper. Competition between schools in a quasi-market environment also appears as an obstacle to the egalitarian project.

**Key words:** School education, Grade retention, Social selection, Equality.

## Resumen

La educación escolar en la Bélgica franco parlante ha hecho un gran uso de la repitencia escolar para enfrentar los problemas de los alumnos. Desde 1995, un número de iniciativas políticas ha apuntado a reducir el número de alumnos repitentes en la escuela primaria, a través de prohibir la repitencia de años dentro de los ciclos de estudio y a través de la promoción de cambios en la práctica pedagógica. El principal objetivo de esta reforma es luchar contra la selección social que se observa en la repitencia e incrementar la igualdad de oportunidades y la equidad de resultados al momento que los alumnos terminan la escuela primaria. Un análisis de las percepciones y prácticas de los profesores del primer ciclo básico, evidencia el grado de conflicto entre esta reforma y el concepto espontáneo que los profesores tienen de lo que es equidad. En este sentido, este artículo presenta y discute diferentes conceptos de lo que se entiende por equidad. La competencia entre escuelas en un ambiente de quasi-market también se muestra como un obstáculo para un proyecto de equidad.

**Palabras clave:** Educación escolar, Repitencia escolar, Selección social, Equidad.

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## 1. Introduction

A recent reform of primary schooling in the French Community of Belgium (FCB, the political authority for schools in French-speaking Belgium), is presented and discussed in terms of equity transformation. Rather than one specific reform, we analyse here a raft of policies adopted between 1995 and 1997, which have modified the educational structure within primary schools with the aim of promoting more equality between pupils. Adopting the term used in the most specific decree about this reform, I will refer to this ensemble of policies as "School for Success".

To assist an understanding of this policy, I have first to make two observations about the characteristics of the school system in FCB. The first one is about its decentralized and fragmented nature; the second is about persistent inequalities between pupils.

The Belgian school system was built from the start around the core principle of "freedom of instruction" asserted from the creation of the Belgian State in 1830. By this principle, a twofold freedom was granted: on the one hand, the opportunity was left to the religious congregations (and more generally to any form of private association or public organization) to offer educational services while enjoying great freedom of instruction. On the other hand, the choice of the school was left to the families, according to their philosophical and religious convictions. In this context, the role of the State in the education system was relatively slight. Throughout the history of the school system, and still today, various "organizing authorities" or "school boards" can offer schooling while enjoying a high level of autonomy: freedom in defining the school curriculum, in recruiting teachers and students, in pupil assessment and in the financial management of the school.

Freedom of instruction is thus a key characteristic of the school system in FCB. However, several authors defended the idea that freedom of choice, instituted at the beginning to organize a transaction between Catholic and lay pressure groups, tended to change its meaning, in particular under the influence of the accentuated secularization of the country. It is becoming more and more a "commercial" freedom, making it possible for parents to choose the school according to criteria referring firstly to the "quality of teaching" and personal opportunities (Dupriez & Maroy, 2003). One could thus show that the Belgian school system approached a quasi-market, like those developed in England or New Zealand; however, it cannot be said that this was the result of a voluntarist and conscious policy. If the effects of the quasi-market, in Belgium as in these other countries, tended to accentuate the school and social segregation between schools (Vandenberghe, 1999; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995), in Belgium free choice was never defended by the governments as a key vector of an improvement of the quality of the schools. One can even say that the quasi-market was especially denounced for its negative effects.

In parallel, since the beginning of the 1990s, various intellectuals have highlighted the poor results of the FCB school system in international surveys. This resulted in criticism, denouncing the inefficiency of the system, in particular in fighting against academic failure and grade repetition (Crahay, 1996). This debate was closely

connected to a strike by teachers, who were faced with drastic reductions in employment (in the period 1992–96). Confronted with the teachers' demands for "refinancing", certain experts denounced the "low effectiveness and the weak efficiency" of the system, and the misuse of financial resources in a context where public expenditure on education was higher than the European average. More recent data, elaborated on the basis of secondary analysis of the data from PISA 2000 (Dupriez & Vandenberghe, 2004) show that in FCB, inequalities of results among pupils (among other indicators, the standard deviation in the distribution of scores) are the highest in Europe, and that there is a significant inequality of opportunity: here more than elsewhere, a pupil's score can be predicted on the basis of the socio-cultural characteristics of his or her family.

In this context, from 1995 onwards, a significant reform of primary schooling is carried out, which, through a modification of the curriculum structure and a restriction of schools' autonomy, aimed to increase equality of results and equality of opportunity. After specifying briefly the theoretical referents on which our analysis is built, we analyse in this paper the trajectory of this policy. We will pay particular attention to the context of policy text production and to the context of practices and practitioners, where the meaning of the policy is decoded and adjusted by the teachers with reference to their own representations and local context.

## 2. Analytical Framework

Educational reform is seen here as an educational policy. It is an initiative by political authorities aiming to regulate the actions and interactions of actors upon whom it has some control. In this way, educational policy bears representations encoded in complex ways (via struggles and compromises) and also decoded in complex ways (via actors' interpretations in relation to their histories, resources and context) (Ball, 1994). The meaning of the policy itself changes depending on the context of the interpretation. In this study, I will distinguish two basic contexts: the *context of policy text production* and the *context of practices and practitioners*.

Policy text production refers to the environment of the stakeholders. It is the macro-level where policy has to be understood in a structural context as a response to political, economic and cultural issues. And the policy is the result of compromises which are significant in reference to this macro-level context and history. But policy as *textual intervention into practice* does not determine action. In fact the policy, like a page which action comes to write upon, constitutes both a constraint and a resource for actors (Giddens, 1979); and the macro-system itself is at intervals worked on, reactivated, or remodeled by the games of local actors. Policies create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed. But interpretations of the policy and local responses are constructed in context. Consequently, any analysis of educational policy must take into account local enactments of the policy and construct interrelations between context of policy text production and the contexts of practices and practitioners. Because it is inside the schools and classrooms that school managers and teachers put the bits and pieces together. "Individually and collectively they must make

sense of reform, and at organization and classroom level develop interpretations and practices which engage seriously with the changes and their consequences for working relationships and for teaching and learning". (Ball 1994, p. 12). In this way, our work falls within the sociological paradigm of social constructionism, which tries to articulate the ways in which structures and actors' games are taken into account (Corcuff, 1995) for the construction of social action.

In conjunction with this two-level analysis, we will discuss the normative assumptions underlying concepts of justice and equality, trying to show how these concepts differ with the contexts and how characteristics of macro-level context affect the enactment of the policy at school and classroom level.

### **3. Context of Policy Text Production**

The Belgian education system is thus from the start a relatively decentralized system from the point of view of the school initiative. This fragmentation can be seen in the fact that great disparities exist in several aspects between the schools and between the school boards as regards curricula, modes of evaluation and certification of pupils, and recruitment of the students and teachers. These disparities appear to be associated with pronounced inequalities between schools and between pupils. In this context, the important work of parliament with reference to educational laws and decrees - between 1995 and 1997 - seems to be a response by the authorities to this diagnosis. Taking its inspiration from international experiences and especially from the school structure in Scandinavian countries, the government (advised by educational experts) started promoting a new concept of education. New ways of managing pupils' heterogeneity and pupils with learning difficulties where especially emphasised.

In this way, an important characteristic of the "School for Success" reform is the definition of numerous rules for all schools, public and Catholic, state-organized and state-subsidized. It is an important step towards a shared base of rules limiting the significant autonomy which school authorities have possessed. For this research, our main interest is about the transformation of the structure of curriculum; but we will mention briefly other parallel changes.

With reference to the structure of the curriculum, in 1995 the political authorities adopted a decree entitled "Decree relating to the promotion of a School for Success in foundational education". This decree consisted of a short text, not very explicit as to its ultimate ambitions, whose importance was only partially clear at the time of its adoption. However, it proved to be a significant agent for the transformation of the curriculum in foundational education (from 3 to 12 years old) and in particular, in primary education (from 6 to 12). Basically this decree announced that in due course (between 2000 and 2005, depending on the particular level) schools in foundational education had to organize teaching into cycles in order to enable each child "to progress through his or her education in a continuous fashion, at his or her own pace and without repeating a year from his or her entry into kindergarten until the end of the second year of primary school" (Stage One) and from the third year

until the sixth year of primary school (Stage Two). It is only at the end of the stages that teachers may, if necessary, decide that a pupil should do a complementary year in his or her current stage.

This decree had major consequences for teachers in French-speaking Belgium, who have made widespread use of the repetition of years in managing pupils in difficulties. Thus, according to the available statistics for the beginning of the 1990s (Crahay, 1996), it appears that 29.5% of pupils had repeated at least one year by the end of their primary schooling. Teachers, therefore, would have to adapt themselves to this new measure and put other strategies in place to help pupils in difficulties. Further texts went on to specify the measures opted for. The decree "Missions" in July 1997 explicitly introduced educational orientations inviting all teaching establishments to develop measures for differentiated teaching, i.e. to vary teaching methods in order to take account of heterogeneity within classes and the diversity of pupils' learning needs. It also called for progress reports in order to provide pupils with feedback, independent of the formal marks which were to be given at the end of each stage. More detailed ministerial circulars then took up this proposal in detail. They were grouped around three key themes: within each educational stage, due value was to be given to the *continuity of the learning process*, over and above the division into class years; measures for *differentiated teaching* were to be put in place in order to adapt to the heterogeneity of the pupils; and finally, the learning process was to be regulated by means of *progress reports*.

In parallel, the decree "Missions" also introduced the reference to a threshold of competences. In this way, the State promulgated standards of competence corresponding to basic instruction (6 to 14). Schools can maintain their own programs but these must fit with the standards, and all the children must attain the common threshold. In the same decree, various articles defined stricter rules governing registration and suspension of students, limiting the autonomy which Catholic schools possessed.

The reorganization of primary education and the initial part of secondary education into multi-year cycles of study, the banning of repetition of a year within the cycles, criticism of streaming, and a common core-curriculum clearly fit with the objective of a more integrated system of education, close to what is offered in the Scandinavian countries. In this sense, "School for Success" can be seen as a major piece in the construction of a more egalitarian school system.

Before specifying the different concepts of equality managed around this policy, it is however important to mention that teachers' unions opposed another interpretation of this policy, specifically concerning the criticism of grade retention. They considered that it was fundamentally a budgetary policy: in a context of budget cuts, school success is cheaper than school failure (with grade retention, the pupils stay in the school system for longer). Furthermore, they considered that this policy, drawn up by politicians and educational experts, is a path towards standardization of classroom practice attempting to reduce the professional nature of the teacher's work.

In terms of equality, let us begin by recalling that aims of equality occupy a modest place in the history of school education in Belgium (Dupriez & Maroy, 2003). The importance historically accorded to freedom of teaching did not favour the development of aims of equality. And such a key text as the School Pact (1958) limited itself to providing for equality of access for pupils by banning all forms of school tuition fees and guaranteeing funding for both public and private education.

There is, then, something specifically new about the political texts from the beginning of the 1990s and in the statement made more or less explicitly in different documents of an ideal of equality of results. It is this ideal of equality that is at the origin of the "Standards of Competence" as a norm imposed on all schools and defining the basic attainments to be achieved by all pupils at each stage of their education. For its part, the 1997 decree "Missions" stressed the objective of equality of opportunity. This stated that all school boards should "ensure that the schools for which they are responsible should take into account their pupils' social and cultural backgrounds, so as to provide each of them with equal opportunity of entering society, culture and the world of work." The declared objective is to neutralize the effects of belonging to one particular social or cultural category as a factor in the prediction of educational attainment and employment.

Looking at the normative assumptions of these conceptions, it is necessary to take into consideration that the main shift with anterior conceptions of equality is the emergence of an *ex post* conception. The school's role is not only to give the *possibility* of getting educational achievements for everyone; it is to make *effective*, at leaving school, equality of opportunity and attainment of basic learning for everyone. I develop below a short analysis of these two concepts of *ex post* equality.

### 3.1. Equality of Opportunity of Results

Equality of opportunity, as expressed through the decree "Missions" is not the traditional Rawlsian (Rawls, 1971) and "social-liberal" conception of fair equality of opportunity. It is a more radical statement. It should be borne in mind that for Rawls, "social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity". Hence, at given innate talents or natural endowments, all individuals, from all social groups, should have the same opportunities. And school is one of the main institutions involved in this goal. However, it has to be noted that Rawls is not concerned with actual achievements, but with expected outcomes. As Arnsperger and Van Parijs (2000) put it, "The principle of fair equality of opportunity does not demand that all categories of citizens should be guaranteed the same probability of access to different social positions; it simply asks that people having the same talents should have the same possibility of access to those positions." (Arnsperger & Van Parijs, 2000, p. 59.) The meaning of equality of opportunity expressed through the policy here analysed is, on the other hand, centred on educational achievement and social perspectives at leaving school. It demands a special investment from schools, teachers and heads to get equality of results among social groups or what we could

call *equality of opportunity of results*. Through this work of equalization done by the school, pupils are supposed to have the same opportunities after school.

### 3.2. Equality of Basic Learning

The second conception of equality suggested by this policy is *equality of basic learning*. It refers to the basic attainments to be achieved by all pupils, during the first stages of education (6-14 years). There are two main differences between this conception and equality of opportunity of results. First, it is centred on the first stages of education while equality of opportunity refers to the whole school system and access to higher education. Secondly, equality of opportunity of results focuses on the differences between social classes, tolerating differences between children within every social group. The objective of basic attainments achieved by all pupils does not tolerate inequalities between pupils, at least with reference to this basic learning.

In this way, equality of basic learning can be interpreted in the light of two contemporary theories of social justice: Walzer's theory and the sufficientist approach.

Let us recall in just a few lines that the outstandingly original factor of Walzer's (1983) work lies in proposing the existence of distinct spheres of justice, each corresponding to specific concepts of a certain type of good (education, work, wealth, etc.) and each incorporating its own criteria with regard to the distribution of goods. In his eyes, a society ruled by a "complex equality" is a society in which no one type of good dominates the others. A favourable position in one sphere cannot therefore bring with it a favourable position in a different sphere; otherwise such a society is called tyrannical.

But what interests us in particular is the way he envisages the question of equality within the educational sphere. His major contribution concerns the first stage of learning, basic education. In a democratic society, the main objective of this stage has to be the education of citizens and the curriculum is defined in function of the needs of the exercise of citizenship. And, just as a democratic society starts off from the principle that all individuals are capable of learning and sharing in political life, a democratic school is based on that same principle. Hence the aim of a teacher of reading is not to provide equal opportunities but to obtain equal results (Walzer, 1983).

In a similar way, the sufficientist approach considers that, in an unconditional way, all individuals should be able to benefit from the minimum resources which will enable them to provide for a certain number of basic needs. The originality of this school of thought is double. Firstly, it is characterized by the definition of a threshold. What needs to be equally distributed is not the whole set of resources, but access to a minimum threshold, which, in the educational field, may correspond to the basic learning or threshold of competences. In the second place, sufficientism

is differentiated from several other schools of thought in the measure in which the objective of guaranteeing a minimum threshold to each individual does not take account of their own degree of responsibility for their situation. In other words, whatever the reasons for a person's failure to achieve a minimum threshold, the community should commit itself to guaranteeing that achievement. For example, if someone is in a situation of poverty after having wasted his or her resources, sufficientists consider that the State ought to come to his or her help even though that person is responsible for his or her situation.

Analysis of such a concept of equality can be made from traditional categories in political philosophy: the place for choices and circumstances (Gosseries, 2000). Most theories of justice consider that a just society must compensate, as far as possible, for inequalities resulting from circumstances for which people are not responsible. But inequalities resulting from differences in terms of choices and aspirations are usually accepted, except by strict egalitarians who reject all inequality as intrinsically bad. The specificity of Walzer's theory and the sufficientist approach is to wish to fight against all inequalities, resulting from all circumstances (and not only social ones) and from individual choices, at least up to a definite threshold, here called basic learning. This objective must be discussed in the educational context. This will now be done, assuming the following question: Despite differences in choice and circumstances, is it possible to guarantee to all pupils a minimum threshold of learning and competence?

We should distinguish among the circumstances, those linked to an individual's capacities (their talents) and those linked to their socio-cultural background. What about socio-cultural differences? Are school and society capable of enabling all pupils of all origins to acquire this minimum learning? We may begin by recalling that on this criterion the sufficientist approach is less ambitious than the Rawlsian approach, since it is content to formulate this objective in relation to a minimum threshold. Additionally, we can note that on the basis of a measurement of educational attainments, the Scandinavian educational systems have reached the point of almost completely demolishing the link between socio-cultural origins and educational performance (EGREES, 2003; Gorard & Smith, 2004). This is empirical evidence.

With reference to pupils' talents and cognitive capacity, the response from educational experts is clear. Through the postulate of universal educability, they consider that every individual is capable of being educated, and, in a stimulating environment, can be let to a relatively high level of education. The work done by Bloom (1976) on the "pedagogy of mastery" is there to witness to this. The only exception, and one whose definition has obvious weaknesses, is that people suffering from a mental and/or cognitive handicap could be considered as distinct, orientated towards specialized education and educated with regard to other objectives.

Finally, can one educate someone against their will and if they refuse to engage in a learning process? It is here that the sufficientist approach in the field of education poses, in the clearest way, problems which are not present in other fields. One can waste one's money and still hope to receive more, one can be an inveterate smoker



and still demand treatment, but it would be much harder to refuse to learn and still acquire learning. This question is not answered by sufficientist thinkers. We can, on the other hand, observe the development of this concept when becoming an action principle for teachers and head-teachers.

## **4. Contexts of Practices and Practitioners**

Beyond this analysis of the global environment, the essential part of this research consisted of case studies carried out with the educational teams (or their representatives) in five primary schools. On the basis of data collected between May 2002 and May 2003 this work enabled five monographs to be written on the schools (cf. Dupriez, Cornet, Bodson and De Smet, 2003) in which the processes of each school were described and situated within a specific environment. But beyond the specificities of each school a certain number of general tendencies stand out and are only fully comprehensible if local action is situated within a wider setting. This is what is done below, after a brief description of the methodological orientations of the research.

### **4.1. Methodology**

The choice of a qualitative approach needs to be explained on two levels. Firstly, shortly before this research was undertaken, a survey by questionnaire (Crahay & Donnay, 2002) was conducted into primary education and revealed resistance to this reform on the part of approximately half the teachers surveyed. Secondly, our objective, complementing this quantitative research, was essentially to understand teachers' perceptions and the basis for this resistance, for which qualitative research seemed to offer richer results. Additionally, the research team wished to undertake this study through a close relationship between researchers and actors, and in particular by associating the teachers with the work of analysing and interpreting the data.

The five schools were selected on the basis of two parameters: the size of the school and the a priori mode of implementing the study-cycles (multi-grade classes and single level classes). These schools, additionally, come from public and private sector. In each of the schools we had access to different presentation documents: in particular, the mission statement and the activities report. We conducted three preliminary interviews (with the head-teacher and two other teachers), followed by four sociological intervention sessions (Group work sessions, Dubet, 1987). In three of the schools, these group work sessions were conducted with all the teachers and the head together; in the two larger schools (with over 25 teachers), the work was done with the head and a volunteer group of teachers. The aim of the interviews was to acquaint ourselves with the history of the school, actors' representations around the subject of heterogeneity and equality, and the teaching practices put in place in the context of the reform. The structure of the four sociological intervention sessions was conceived on the basis of devices for mental training (Chosson, 1991):

the first session aimed to bring into the open people's representations around the problem posed (ways of managing heterogeneity and the predicted effects in terms of equality); the second session was dedicated to problematization, i.e. bringing existing representations into tension and argument; the third session was dedicated to analysis properly so called, flagging up the relation between the phenomena observed and accounting for them through means of models; and the fourth and final session was dedicated to proposition: in view of the analysis which had been conducted, what action strategies did the people involved wish to propose? At the close of each session the researchers drew up a detailed report which was submitted to all group members for approval. All these data together made up the body of the research. The diversity of sources and the fact that the work was spread out over the course of a year (spanning two academic years) enabled us to "triangulate" and cross-check the information collected. The interview transcripts and the session reports were subjected to thematic analysis in order to preserve the elements which players themselves thought important while linking them to more general problematic and concepts. From the epistemological standpoint the objective was to propose a plausible or trustworthy interpretation of the facts under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **4.2. Conceptions of Equality**

This work confirmed various kinds of resistance on the part of teachers with regard to the reform, both against applying the pedagogical measures suggested and against subscribing to the concepts of equality promoted. I will stress in detail the teachers' reactions to the goals of the reform in terms of equality, showing at the same time how the concepts of equality fit with representations about pupils and in particular pupils with learning difficulties.

We showed above how the official objectives of schooling in French-speaking Belgium explicitly include the aim of equality of access to a minimum threshold of results (equality of basic learning) and equality of opportunity of results, in the sense of an absence of a pre-determined pathway through education in function of pupils' socio-cultural characteristics. This double aim is a recent factor in Belgian education and is distinct from the traditional notion of equality of access to schools. In Table 1 we set out again from these conceptions of equality, and, with regard to the research, we specify their degree of legitimacy in the views of the actors, and teachers' (and head-teachers') modes of participation in these conceptions of equality.

**Table 1:** Conceptions of equality, legitimacy and teacher participation

Conceptions	Normative assumption	Legitimacy for teachers	Teacher participation
<b>Equality of basic learning:</b> Equal access to a minimum threshold of results (standards of competence).	Individuals do not have either the same resources (family, etc.) or the same talent. But everyone has to achieve basic learning.	Fair degree of legitimacy for this objective, but it is conceived both as difficult for the weaker pupils and at the same time as a levelling-down.	Possibility of remedial work for the weakest pupils.
<b>Equality of opportunity of results:</b> Equal probability of success according to social category	Pupils from different social groups have unequal resources in relation to school. School must equalize and neutralize the effect of belonging to one particular social group.	Major scepticism. Low degree of legitimacy because of compensatory treatment considered to be unjust in the name of equal concern for each pupil.	Participation in the reproducing of inequalities through misunderstanding the structural and cultural effects of the system.
<b>Common humanity:</b> Equality in dignity or in the right of all to be recognized and accepted, independent of talent and destination.	Pupils from different social groups have unequal resources in relation to school. Everyone must receive equal attention and goodwill, but school cannot compensate.	High degree of legitimacy as a personalizing ideology hiding social inequalities in order to affirm ontological equality.	Equal concern for each pupil; the will to give as much to every pupil and to take each as far as possible.

Equality of basic learning, understood as equality of access to a minimum threshold of results, was in general favourably received by teachers. At all events they felt far more at ease with this type of objective than with that of equality of results in the strict sense. It may however be observed that the strategies aiming to attain equality of basic learning are often rather poor, and in many schools consist merely of remedial measures to enable the weakest pupils to receive additional teaching. A minority of teachers, however, was critical of the notion of equality of basic learning, considering that it was a form of levelling-down of educational aims.

By contrast, the objective of equality of opportunity was received with considerable reserve by the teachers who collaborated in this research. They expressed explicit scepticism towards the aim of no longer making success at school depend on the pupils' social or cultural categories. Additionally, the teachers seemed not to have much awareness of the degree of inequality of opportunity and were astonished when the researchers offered quantitative data on how a school career is pre-determined by social factors. I should also highlight how ill-equipped the teachers were to understand the educational difficulties encountered by pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and how much they tended to consider such pupils' difficulties as "acquired deficits" rather than seeing them as "a process still under construction". The researchers asked the teachers and head-teachers about their views of pupils' heterogeneity and possible difficulties which they encounter because of working with (more) heterogeneous classes. The most outstanding factor is the prevalence, in the discourse of many teachers, of a mode of seeing and explaining educational difficulties in terms of psychological and/or logopaedic pathology. Without wishing to deny the relevance of such categories, the frequency with which teachers

referred to them in order to account for children's difficulties in school appears to be problematic. Socio-cultural difficulties were also often invoked to explain the learning or behavioural difficulties encountered in certain pupils. In many cases this was done in terms of "lacks" in comparison with the behaviours expected by teachers. The attitude of certain families was thenceforward labelled as rude, inappropriate, disrespectful, etc. In such cases, as in the previous situation, teachers focused on a lack which characterized such pupils. And that lack was given as the explanation for difficulties in learning. It is easy to see that such perceptions are not really compatible with an aim of equalization of opportunity on leaving school. At this stage of the analysis, it is important to retain the fact that the teachers were sceptical about this conception of equality. That does not mean that they did not support the postulate that everyone can be educated; it meant that, going on their daily experience, made up of inequalities of learning among children, many teachers construct for themselves a perception that not everyone can be equally educated: everyone is capable, but not all of the same thing nor at the same speed. All children can be educated, but certain children are such late starters that they learn much more slowly, while having much more to learn. Thus the gap is even greater, at the point of arrival than it was at the point of departure, despite the teachers' efforts and despite the progress made by the weakest pupils.

In a complementary way, in the five schools with which we worked, it was evident that the egalitarian perspective itself posed a problem to the teachers. When we asked them about their own representations of equality, many of those questioned came up with a different view of it, one which, following Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) we would call common humanity. For these authors, this notion invokes a principle of fundamental equality among all human beings, who all belong to humanity under the same title. In a way, this is a rather mundane form of equality: all human beings are as human as one another. Thus many teachers basically adhere a priori to a minimalist, ontological definition of equality. All children are equal in dignity and in law. Therefore they should all receive equal attention and equal goodwill. Moreover, such a view of pupils and social diversity is fully compatible with a personalizing ideology which is fully present in all schools: "Each child must be enabled to flourish and to progress to the limit of his or her capacity," was something we were often told. Fine, but that sort of outlook also risks masking the inequalities children start out with, thus making it difficult to "fight" against these inequalities.

### **4.3. Educational Niches and Quasi-Markets**

In general terms, it was apparent from this research, as from previous studies (Dubet, 2002), that teachers were relatively insensitive towards schools' institutional and socio-political dimensions. Their perceptions of their job were related first and foremost to the space of the class, and their teaching relationship with their pupils. These perceptions were expressed in terms of the child's well-being, development and progress, and the quality of learning, leaving out the more political aspects of their job. Moreover, this concentration on the child went together with a large degree of ignorance about the "factors in the system". What becomes of the children who leave the school? Where do those who are unable to get into it go? Who are the

ones that do not obtain their Certificate of Primary Education, and what becomes of them? Why do many more children from disadvantaged backgrounds fail at school? These are, typically, questions which teachers tended not to ask or work on.

When these questions were posed, on the scale of the educational system as a whole, they and the empirical data which provided the answers were a cause of astonishment to many teachers. Through this research, many discovered the extent of the inequalities in the educational system in French-speaking Belgium, but did not actually see the link between those facts and their own everyday work at their particular school. These questions became, in reality, more painful when the researchers tried to establish such a link and made the teaching staff of a school reflect on their contribution, whether voluntary or involuntary, to the construction of an inegalitarian school system.

The notion of "educational niche" seems to us to be a significant theoretical contribution to account for the process observed here. We originally set off from the hypothesis that it is through unconnected selection strategies, sometimes voluntary and sometimes not, that each school influences its own pupil composition and so contributes to the construction of a highly segregated educational system. By the end of our research, the phenomenon appeared to be more complex than that and to lie closer to the very heart of the educational system. We would say that the construction of a school's culture and identity is at one and the same time the expression of a dynamic mission within the school, and a way of positioning itself in the market environment. By analogy with the biological and economic notions of niche, we consider that the educational niche is the result, both social (and so bearing on the school's pupil composition) and educational (and so bearing on a specific way of envisaging and tackling the pupils' learning) of a process of reciprocal adaptation between the school and its pupils and pupils' families.

Each school, on drawing up for itself a more or less specific plan, does in a global way what is asked of it. The construction of a school culture and identity are additionally parameters which are widely evoked and evaluated in the literature on effective schools (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). But, on constructing its specific way of tackling its teaching work, each school makes itself attractive to one category of users and simultaneously deprives itself of or even rejects other categories of users. The times of the "out-of-hours child supervision", the choice of teaching specialities, the implicit reference to a school's level, are clearly some of the elements of this attraction and/or repulsion. The teachers generally have a positive attitude towards this phenomenon and are proud to welcome the pupils to whom their school gives priority. They seem to be far less aware that other pupils are at the same time being excluded. At the inter-school level, this approach has the additional advantage of enabling each school to specialize in catering for a certain group, which reduces the uncertainties linked to a risk of pupils changing schools in large numbers, in the structural context of the educational quasi-market. This approach is also capable of reducing competition to the degree in which each school positions itself in a niche which differs from those of its direct competitors. Moreover, given the high degree of decentralization of the school system and the lack of control over teaching activity in the classroom, it seems that by reason of its niche each school also adapts to a

greater or lesser degree the educational objectives (such as the standards of competence) defined by the political authorities.

Each school, then, has an interest in creating a niche for itself. Of the schools with which we worked, "Living Together" was thus seen as a school with a very community-oriented outlook of openness and participation. And, as the head pointed out, "Those who leave us, leave because they are looking for a different kind of teaching from what there is here." The "Central School" desired to remain a small, personal, user-friendly school; the "Country School", still more so, was implanted in rural surroundings, working with very small groups of children and offering a generous welcome to pupils with educational difficulties. The "Dovecote School" was keen to maintain its reputation and level despite the changes in its population. Hence the educational niche can be seen as a means of accounting simultaneously for what is praised, i.e. schools' capacity to construct their own identity and mission, and also what is silenced or rejected, i.e. their need to hold their own place in competition with other schools.

## 5. Conclusion

This research illustrates to what point importing into a school system a structure or way of functioning which has been tested elsewhere, does not necessarily produce the effects attributed to it in other countries. What is particularly noteworthy here is how difficult it is to implant in schools ways of working and objectives which, in the eyes of the Government, seem to represent the ideal solution to the problems of (in)effectiveness and (in)equality encountered in primary education. This tension between the local significance of a policy and its "central" significance needs to be elucidated by underlining the constraints and risks which are specific to each of those contexts.

With regard to the "centre", the period 1995/1996 was a difficult one for the government of the FCB. The budgetary situation of the country was critical; many jobs in the teaching sector had been suppressed, causing widespread and long-drawn-out strikes in schools. A clearer understanding emerged of major factors of ineffectiveness and inequalities in the educational system. The Centre-Left government in power at the time saw the importance of restoring to schools a sense of direction and purpose, and the key to this was the quest for greater equality. Offering all pupils equal opportunities of social emancipation was proposed as one of the school's main objectives. Taking as its inspiration what had been done in countries which had produced the greatest equality in schools (principally Sweden and Finland), the government decided to move gradually towards a more integrated and comprehensive school system. Without concerning itself too much about the implementation of such a policy, the authorities thought they had constructed a new motivating project. Not only was the objective – success for all – a noble one, but additionally, those who planned it thought that they knew the solution: working in cycles and developing differentiated teaching practices in classes. And, as the teachers' unions underlined, a significant reduction of failures at school should

bring about a corresponding reduction in expenditure on education. Pedagogical and economic arguments reinforced one another.

In schools, apart from a minority of teachers who were already working with this aim and who now felt strengthened in their views, the situation was more complex. Local constraints were obviously present. Although the government made equality into a major aim, it did nothing to modify the quasi-market structure which is known to produce segregation and inequalities. Local pressures for each school to maintain its clientele were therefore extremely powerful, and conflicted strongly with the aim of a single education and basic learning for all. Insofar as the government policy relied essentially on educational discourse and prescriptions, two elements were to be observed. In the first place, pressure from the centre was not strong enough to counteract market forces. Most schools remained faithful to their particular educational niche and maintained the practices of selection and sorting that they had operated prior to the reform. Secondly, the discourse was sufficiently strong to lay the guilt on the teachers, and create a progressive sense of role alienation (Cattonar & Maroy, 2000). The distance between their declared role (little certification of evaluation, work in multi-year cycles, joint teaching by groups of teachers, differentiated teaching methods within classes) and their true role was incontestable, and was clearly apparent in three of the schools we worked with.

It is in this context of defensiveness on the part of teachers that the misunderstanding of the meaning of the term "equality" must be understood. It is due in some measure to self-protection: that teachers cannot believe that all children, whatever their background, can succeed in school. It is simpler to believe that pupils arrive at school with gaps too great to be bridged, whether psychological, cognitive or cultural, and that the teacher is not in a position to obtain success for all of them.

It is clear that the implementation of a reform cannot limit itself to modifying the structure of the curriculum. Hence, other conditions need to be put in place (see Walzer, 1983) to ensure that the primary school is really a school for success for all pupils. Among the different conditions suggested by Walzer, we have selected three: internal heterogeneity within schools; adapting the means in function of pupils' needs; and protecting schools from external pressures.

- Walzer considers that a primary school whose prime objective is the education of citizens must ensure that citizens *from different backgrounds* are present in each school. So within every school, within determined geographical zones, there should be the same proportions of children from diverse social backgrounds.
- Additionally, it must be clearly stated that in order for all children to achieve the same results, they cannot all be treated in the same way. Certain children will need to receive a *disproportionate* part of the teacher's attention if they are to achieve the same results as the others.
- Finally, the aim of a primary school for citizens, aiming at equal results in basic education for all, is only possible if the school is sufficiently autonomous with regard to the wider community. Because, as Walzer says,

"the pressure which is exerted to enlarge the natural distinctions already existing among the pupils, to identify the future rulers of the country, comes almost entirely from outside" (Walzer, 1983, p. 288). To have egalitarian effects and to counter the pressure from other spheres, in other words to prevent society from becoming tyrannical, schools must be *protected from external pressures*, and the teachers are the guarantors of this closed space. This third condition is admittedly only to be envisaged with a teaching body which is sure of itself, professionally esteemed, and involved in defining the content of its own role.

The non-respecting of these three conditions in the FCB must be taken into account if the reasons for the difficulty in local implementation of this ambitious policy are to be understood.

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