1-1-1997

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THE PROBLEM OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN THE FRENCH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Lara Becker

Introduction

Education is the process of developing knowledge, mind, and character of an individual or population by formal schooling, teaching, and application. Education is a critical factor in promoting economic growth, increasing equality in the income distribution, reducing regional income disparity, maintaining global competition, and eliminating poverty. France, like the United States, has one of the most advanced systems of education in the world today. Unfortunately, there is no educational system that is perfect. As is the case in most industrial countries, the French system is constantly being adapted and improved. The past thirty years have seen periods of intense activity and challenge, which have resulted in numerous changes in France's educational system.

The strength of French education is that it is constantly reforming and advancing. However, even with these improvements, France is still plagued with the problem of underachievement. Excessive numbers of dropouts, a small population continuing on to higher education, and an increase in the unemployment rate of dropouts are all consequences with which academic failure is associated. France is often perceived by outsiders as intellectually and culturally oriented, and the French like to regard themselves as guardians of civilized values. However, large numbers of lower and middle class French youth stop their schooling when they reach the limit of compulsory education at age sixteen. (Kurian, p. 410) Therefore, it seems that the great intellectual qualities associated with French education and culture are often limited to those at the apex of the socio-economic pyramid rather than are characteristic of the masses.

Education is a prominent issue today not only in France, but all over the world. France is currently trying to reduce the problem of underachievement by making education a top
national priority. The principal consequences of underachievement in France will eventually extend to the economy and society itself because an undereducated student population inevitably becomes an undereducated workforce. In this article I examine the causes of academic failure, the social and economic consequences of underachievement, government expenditures on education, and France's attempt at solutions.

History of French Education

It is impossible to understand the philosophy, values, and reform efforts of French education without some knowledge of its troubled history. Before the French Revolution the parochial schools had a monopoly on education, and the Jesuits controlled these institutions. One of their instructional methods consisted of teaching catechism to the children of the poor, and worse, in French rather than Latin. Nonetheless, under the ancien regime there had been a general consensus about the purpose of education — that it was to form upstanding Christian citizens. (Corbett, p. 93) The revolutionaries saw a different value to instruction. They realized that the success of their enterprise depended on educating the whole population. Therefore, schooling came to occupy the center of political debate in France, and the so-called “school-war” between the advocates of secular and parochial education is still alive two hundred years later. (Corbett, p. 94)

In the 1970s the image of a highly centralized educational system (i.e., a system that was organized under one group’s control) in France was extremely apparent. Criticism of the “fortress” of the Education Ministry's central bureaucracy became increasingly frequent, and the Ministry was sometimes described as a “dinosaur,” a gigantic and cumbersome anachronism. However, the decentralization reforms of 1982 and 1985 ushered in a radical change in the place and role of the state in French society, especially in education. A substantial proportion of the state’s responsibilities was given to local authorities, while the decentralization process was matched by a move towards greater delegation of decision making within the government. Secondary schools were given a greater degree of autonomy, as were universities. (OECD, 1996, p. 15)

Today, the educational system of France is decentralized, state supported, and dependent upon the Ministry of National Education.

Two main fundamental changes in the French educational system since the late 1970s have been to give all young people a solid education (despite their social or cultural disadvantages) and to improve performance throughout the entire educational system. The major concern is that of underachievement, with many students failing at their studies, dropping out of secondary school, and not going on to higher education. For some time, it was possible to view this problem as an essentially transitory concern. However, France has currently been compelled to recognize two facts:

1. Despite major innovations in teaching and learning techniques, the problem of underachievement persists. It is becoming increasingly unlikely that this is no more than a temporary phenomenon. In fact, it often seems as if the gap between the students struggling to keep abreast and the bulk of the school age population keeps widening.

2. It is becoming more and more apparent that underachievement is not just a consequence of the circumstances of the individual, but also very largely a social phenomenon. Almost everywhere its victims are children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. (OECD, 1996, p. 173)

Underachievement is gaining widespread attention as France tries to put an end to academic failure. The underachievement of students has a substantial negative impact on France, causing harm to its economy and to its society.

In order to understand the context of the issues raised in this paper, it is first necessary to understand the type of education that students receive. The right to an education is a tenet of the French constitution, as education is compulsory for children between the ages of six and sixteen. Children start out in preschool and strive to one day obtain a diploma from a université. Similar to American educa-
tion, the French educational system is divided into three levels:
• Primary education: early childhood education and elementary education, provided in nursery and primary schools.
• Secondary education: lower secondary education, provided mainly in collèges, and upper secondary education, provided either in vocational lycées or technological and general lycées.
• Higher education: provided in universities, including university institutes of technology (IUT) and grandes écoles (specialized institutes of higher education) and in post-baccalauréat lycée classes (additional technician sections and preparatory classes for competitive entrance examinations to grandes écoles). (OECD, 1996, p. 20)

Schooling in France, especially at the secondary and higher education levels, is generally characterized as rigid, fast-paced, and extremely difficult. Only the best survive, which is why going on to higher education is considered a great and important achievement. Because underachievement is most prominent in secondary education, I will now examine this educational stream.

The Secondary Educational System

Secondary schooling in France lasts seven years, from age eleven to eighteen. It is divided into two sections, which take place in different establishments. The first four years are spent in collège (junior high school) and the last three years in lycée (high school). During these seven years, the student workload grows exceedingly intensive — twenty-five to twenty-eight weekly contact hours in collège and as many as thirty-five hours in lycée, plus anywhere from three to ten hours of home study per week, depending on classes. There is a weeding out process during these years which distinguishes the successful students from the unsuccessful. Due to this process, only fifty percent of an age group will take the coveted terminal examination called the baccalauréat, or BAC for short, which is required for entering a university. This percentage is four times higher than in the 1960s, but it still reveals the extent of the reforms that will be necessary to meet the declared goal of eighty percent by the Ministry of National Education. Only one out of nine pupils takes the examination at the age of eighteen, which means it is not infrequent for many to repeat a year or more of schooling. (Corbett, p. 107) These statistics are alarming because the economic well-being of a country depends on a highly educated society.

General academic courses leading to the baccalauréat examination and usually to higher education are offered by general lycées, as opposed to the technological or vocational lycées. This general level of schooling offers several different areas of study. In each area, the core subjects of the collège curriculum continue to be studied and examined, but at a different level according to student specialization. The first year of lycée is called seconde, during which all pupils take the same courses: mathematics, physics, biology, French, history, geography, physical education, and two foreign languages. At the end of the seconde, students have to choose the areas in which they want to specialize for the final two years. Upon completion of the lycée, students hope to take the BAC and go to a université. All students who successfully receive the BAC are guaranteed admission into one of the state universities.

In addition to the general BAC, there is also a technical baccalauréat, which contains different types of questions. Most commonly, students from less privileged social categories benefit from this exam because of the subject matter that is being tested. In general, scientific sections such as advanced math and physics contained in the general BAC are preferred by the “more privileged” students. The technical BAC contains questions dealing with a specific trade or questions on certain types of machinery. Therefore, students from lower income families tend to score higher on this type of BAC. (Monchablon, p. 2380) Another area that is offered in secondary education is vocational training, also known as lycées professionnelles. This is a two-year program that leads to a degree called CAP, certificat d’aptitude professionnelle.

French intellectual training does not always produce an “elite” or highly educated student that it sets out to create. Twelve per-
cent of each age group quit school without any qualifications whatsoever. Unfortunately, this figure has not improved over the past ten years. (Corbett, p. 103) The main criticism aimed at the French curriculum is that it is too exhaustive and far beyond the capabilities of the average French student. The result is that in scientific courses, for example, except for the very bright pupils, most are able to learn formulas by rote but cannot really apply them. In other words, they do not learn to think. The programs are designed to select at a very early age the “whiz kids” who will follow a fast track to higher education. (Corbett, p. 104) This competitive system puts students who are not extremely bright in danger of being labeled as underachievers.

Government Expenditures on Education

Over the past twenty years, education has become a top national priority in France. Because academic expenditures have increased sharply, educational programs and assistance are one of the largest items in the government’s budget. Over the period 1975-1992, domestic expenditures on education fluctuated between 6.3 and 6.8 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), but increased in constant terms (at 1992 prices) from FF 292.5 billion to FF 460.6 billion, an average annual rate of growth of 2.5 percent. Total state spending on education in 1992 was FF 03 billion. The current cost of an “average pupil” (at 1992 prices) was approximately FF 19,400 ($3,404), compared with FF 14,200 ($2,491) in 1975, a rise of 37 percent (OECD, 1996, p. 23). In comparison, in 1992 the total expenditure for education in the United States was $458 billion, which is 7.6 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product (U.S. Department of Education, p. 34). Because education is a constitutional responsibility, most of the money for education is directly financed through the government. As can be seen by these statistics, France is putting a considerable amount of revenue into financing a strong and productive educational system. Unfortunately, money alone cannot solve the problem of academic failure.

Social Consequences of Underachievement

Underachievement is not solely a French problem. The educational system of the United States also has to contend with failure among its students. Many students in the American system drop out of school, which usually means not completing twelfth grade or receiving a general equivalence degree. This type of student in the American system is comparable to the French student who never fulfills the requirements of the lycée. In 1993, the total number of dropouts in the United States for ages 14 to 24 was 3.5 million people, or 9.2 percent of the total population in that age category. (U.S. Department of Commerce, p. 174) In addition to examining the percentage of dropouts, it is equally important for one to examine the enrollment ratio. The combined first-, second-, and third-level gross enrollment ratio in the United States (i.e., the number of students enrolled in some level of education whether or not they belong in the “normal” age group for that level) is ninety-six percent, whereas the corresponding ratio for France is only eighty-eight percent. (United Nations, p. 135) These statistics point out that, however serious the problem of underachievement is within the United States, it is still worse in France where almost twelve percent of the population from ages 14 to 24 are not enrolled in some kind of schooling.

Up until now, underachievement was considered to be a problem caused either by a student’s inability to understand or learn academic material, or by a lack of effort. However, studies done by the OECD show that one of the most important reasons why so many students perform at low academic levels is their social background. The OECD states that: Almost everywhere, its victims [of underachievement] are children from backgrounds that combine a number of characteristics such as: a large, quite often single-parent family; a poorly educated father and/or mother with an unskilled, low-grade job; relatively insecure accommodation in either a very remote (outer suburbs) or run-down district; and more recently, immigrant parents, particularly from non-European countries. (OECD, 1996, p. 174)
Generally, underachievement is more common among children from certain social and/or ethnic backgrounds, where lack of money and possibly their native language become barriers to their learning and achieving in France’s intense educational environment.

Neighborhoods in France vary not only by social class, but also by ethnic composition. Over ten percent of elementary students in France are immigrants. These children or their parents primarily come from North Africa (fifty-four percent), Portugal (twenty percent), and Turkey (six percent). (Anderson-Levitt, p. 83) The majority of immigrant children are concentrated in certain metropolitan areas like Paris and Lyon where they attend school. Like children of working-class parents, immigrants' children often repeat grades and are placed in remedial classes. Because most ethnic minority students come from blue-collar homes, it seems apparent that being an immigrant is directly related to a lower social status. The United States faces much the same lower class and immigrant dilemma. In 1993 the total number of students of Hispanic origin who dropped out of school was 1,009,000 — 22.9 percent of the total number of students currently enrolled in school. (United States Department of Commerce, p. 174) However, some analysts believe that the effect of ethnicity on underachievement is relatively small compared to the effect of social class. For example, in France twenty-five percent of immigrants’ children repeat first grade, but so do nineteen percent of non-immigrant children (Anderson-Levitt, p. 83). Underachievement obviously affects a substantial number of lower class students, which therefore includes many immigrants.

A study of French students in the Journal of Developmental Psychology by Michel Duyme reported a positive correlation between parental social class and the academic success of their children. Part of this observation stems from the fact that upper- or middle-class parents can better support their children’s education monetarily because they themselves are probably in high-paying careers. Also, they tend to place a strong emphasis on the value of education. On the other hand, parents who live on lower incomes may not have the money, or do not feel it is important, to purchase crucial supplies that are critical for learning, such as paper, pens, etc. These parents also may not have gone to school themselves, and therefore do not place as much importance on education as do upper- and middle-class parents. Consequently, Duyme’s findings reveal that upper- or middle-class children experience lower rates of school failure than children born to lower-class parents. As Duyme argues further, underachievement “may reflect genetic differences in cognitive performances, which affect social stratification, or, equally well, may stem from the influence of social class or intellectual development.” (Duyme, p. 203) In other words, he feels that intellectual capacities are genetic and may affect the professional success of the parents and the school success of their offspring. He also believes, more importantly, that there are many factors inherent in the parents’ social class that affect the school success of their children. Therefore, underachievement is both a cognitive and a social phenomenon. Unfortunately, the problem of academic failure based on social class is the only one that is able to be addressed.

There are numerous social consequences that stem from underachievement. The most damaging effect is on the French student who has to face the fact that he has failed. Many pupils who are categorized as underachievers are scarred and traumatized by not succeeding in the world of academe. There is an enormous amount of pressure on students to be the best, and students who are incapable of meeting society’s academic challenges may feel left out and worthless. Students, therefore, become frustrated not only with their studies, but also with themselves. A prime example of this problem is the temporary solution of grade-repeating. Many students who have to take a class over again feel too “old” and uncomfortable in this type of learning environment. Because of embarrassment, many of these pupils end up dropping out of school instead of benefiting from taking a class over again. (OECD, 1996, p. 176)

Every child’s self-esteem and image is damaged by his lack of achievement. A pupil who has failed at school strives to feel in control again, and therefore may turn his focus towards juvenile delinquency and violence instead of trying out a different academic track, such as a trade school. (OECD, 1996, p. 174)
When students are not in school they are often unsupervised and tend to get into mischief. They sometimes end up wandering the streets to pass the time with others who are in the same predicament. This problem becomes a vicious circle because these students tend to never want to go back to school. They feel comfortable in the streets, where nobody judges them or groups them as unintelligent. Once a child attains this “loser” frame of mind, it is often very difficult to get back on track. This unfortunate situation also happens in the United States every day. Unfortunately, if this problem of underachievement persists in France, the result will be more delinquent children on the streets without proper guidance.

**Economic Consequences of Underachievement**

There is a substantial amount of research which shows that society as a whole derives significant economic benefits from an educated labor force. As Hanushek says:

> The theory is that more schooling makes people more productive in the labor market, better able to participate in democracy, better consumers, and so forth — in other words, healthy, wealthy, and wise. (p. 1141)

Education is a major factor in promoting economic growth, increasing equality in income distribution, reducing regional income disparity, and eliminating poverty. (McDonald, p. 180). There is a need to train sufficient numbers of qualified workers to meet a country’s economic requirements. With a more educated labor force, France will have a greater ability to produce, trade, negotiate, and do business internationally, which will be more beneficial to its economy in the long run.

The most obvious consequence that any economy faces due to the problem of underachievement is low levels of youth employment. High drop-out rates, low test scores, and poor academic performance create a future labor force which is undereducated for available jobs. Not only does underachievement lead to unemployment, but it also has a significant impact on the work that these undereducated people do. The inadequate educational preparation of many students will affect the competitive posi-

tions of the industries and states in which they work. Employers will suffer in terms of lagging productivity, higher training costs and the possible competitive disadvantage that will result in lost sales and profits. (Levin, p. 23)

**Solutions to the Problem of Underachievement**

Because education is considered extremely important in France, parents, educators, and economists are concerned with the quality of curricula and teachers, how students perform on exams, and the overall knowledge students receive during their educational years. Due to the extreme emphasis placed on the importance of an education, it is no wonder that France as a whole is disturbed by this problem of underachievement, and is currently trying to lower its rate of academic failure.

The first part to any solution is the identification of a problem. One of the problems with underachievement is that it usually goes unnoticed until after students have already given up on school. It is true that some pupils display warning signs of failure before they actually drop out. Unfortunately, these signals are usually looked at by teachers and parents as a sign of apathy and nothing more. The first step in helping students in need, therefore, is noticing when they have a problem. According to Beck and Muia, there are five universal steps that lead to academic failure and, eventually, a student quitting school:

1. A student loses interest in his schoolwork; the consequence is lower grades.
2. A student begins to skip class, and thus comes in contact with school authorities.
3. A student exhibits disruptive behavior, for which he is forced to leave class or is suspended from school.
4. A student’s parents become involved and the student’s defensiveness and negativism increase.
5. A student decides to quit school. (Fitzpatrick, p. 94)

Usually an authority figure’s first instinct is to reprimand a child who displays these negative behaviors. Instead of reinforcing how important an education is, this action further dis-
stances the child from the academic world. Therefore, the first steps in helping with the problem of underachievement is to take notice of and give a helping hand to students in need.

The early 1980s in France were marked as the beginning of a considerable effort to identify the locations where, as a result of an accumulation of socio-cultural handicaps, the majority of students were underachieving or in danger of underachieving. Educational assessment, evaluation, and research is now carried out by the Ministry of Education through statistical surveys to study the effects of the French educational system on its students. Also, other research methods are used to predict the number of students who end up dropping out of school. For example, in 1982 authorities began marking certain "educational priority areas" (zones de 'education prioritaires - ZEPs). The purpose of the schools located in these ZEPs is to improve the academic success of children from rural or urban areas where social, cultural, and economic disadvantages construct a barrier to successful schooling and future employment. The main criteria for establishing schools in these “educational priority areas” depend on the scholastic achievement of students, such as the number of students who must repeat a grade and/or the number of students who drop out of school every year. Also, demographic, social, and economic conditions (social and economic situation of families, proportion of foreign children to non-foreign children, number of children per family) are used to determine whether these ZEPs should be established.

There are numerous positive actions that schools in the ZEPs employ, such as a reduction in the number of pupils in class and the implementation of new teaching and learning methods, which give each student the special attention he needs. There has not been a decrease in the scholastic performances reported by the schools located in the ZEPs, despite the fact that since 1982 the socio-economic conditions prevailing in those areas have further deteriorated. The effects of these ZEPs can be seen in the improving conditions of the schools located in these areas as opposed to schools not located in these priority areas:
• the pupil/teacher ratio in the primary schools, which is 21.67 in the ZEPs as compared with 23.87 for all the pupils at that level;
• the rate of school attendance at three years of age, which was 36.88 in the ZEPs as compared with 34.11 for the country as a whole. (OECD, 1996, p. 184)

There are still, however, problems with these ZEPs. For example, pupils with the same handicaps tend to be grouped together in one class, instead of having the advantage of specifically targeted assistance as members of far more mixed classes, a procedure which generally leads to an improvement in the performance of less able pupils. Also, the criteria for deciding whether or not a school should be included as a ZEP are somewhat ambiguous. There are various constraints which result in some schools being excluded from a ZEP, although they should be in one in order to benefit from the various advantages.

Another attempt at solving the problem of underachievement is aimed solely at immigrants, whereby France has tried different approaches to ease the academic difficulties of immigrant children. For example, the ministry has created “initiation classes” to teach French as a second language. Educators are hoping that once the language barrier is broken, immigrants will have an easier time adapting to the French educational system and start to excel rather than fail. However, these classes serve fewer than one percent of immigrant students. (Anderson-Levitt, p. 80).

Conclusion

The French educational system has undergone many important changes over the last twenty years. There has been a constant effort to increase the effectiveness and fairness of the educational system and to combat scholastic failure, which is more prevalent among pupils from disadvantaged, social, or immigrant backgrounds. There are too many students failing at their studies and dropping out of school, a situation which is harmful not only to the individuals themselves but to France’s economy as well. One of the largest budgets in the French government today is that of education. New programs, new methods of teaching, and ZEPs have been formed to help combat under-
achievement. But even though France has implemented many changes and improvements, underachievement is still a problem.

An educational system does not function in isolation from other social structures, and therefore should not be looked upon as the sole contributor to the problems of a society or an economy. According to the OECD:

[It] is necessary to appreciate what has already been achieved and to understand the limits to what schools can or should do.... Schools should not be asked or expected to make up for all of the shortcomings of other members of the community. In particular, if schools are to be more open to their environment so as to give young people a better preparation for working life and citizenship, their approach must be a cautious one... Schools alone cannot heal all of society's ills... (OECD, 1996, p. 127)

France is currently trying to support education and curb the problem of underachievement. Unfortunately, no one knows what the academic future of French students will be. However, one thing is apparent. The French are approaching the future aggressively, working through their school system to achieve a more intelligent and internationally competitive France.

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