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*Regional Policies towards Early School Leavers.  
A Critical Study*

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# REGIONAL POLICIES TOWARDS EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS. A CRITICAL STUDY

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## **Abstract**

*In this work, Thierry Berthet, Benjamin Castets-Fontaine and Véronique Simon study two regional programs aiming at preventing and reducing school dropout. Inspired by Amartya Sen's capability approach, this analysis takes as a starting point the way these two experimental programs enhance (or not) the pupil's capabilities. It focuses on three capabilities: the ability to express oneself and have its preferences taken into account (capability for voice), the capability to get access to a chosen education (capability for education) and the possibility to build a professional path one has reasons to value (capability for work). The development of these three individual capabilities frames the proposed study of these two regional programs. The first one aims at supporting local case manager's networks in Aquitaine while the second provides financial provisions for innovative projects in the Rhône-Alpes' vocational education and agricultural upper secondary schools. This normative analysis is focused on the students and their well-being. It stresses the importance of taking into consideration the beneficiaries' voice in policy making and implementing. Finally, this study raises the non take-up issue as a key question and a central dimension to the assessment of public policies by a capability approach inspired framework.*

## **Résumé**

*Dans ce cahier, Thierry Berthet, Benjamin Castets-Fontaine et Véronique Simon proposent une lecture originale de deux programmes régionaux de lutte contre le décrochage scolaire. Inspirée de l'approche par les capacités d'Amartya Sen, cette analyse prend pour point de référence la manière dont ces deux programmes régionaux soutiennent les capacités individuelles des élèves. Elle est centrée sur trois capacités (capabilities) : la capacité d'expression (capability for voice), d'accès à une éducation choisie (capability for education) et d'insertion professionnelle (capability for work). C'est à l'aune du développement de ces trois « capacités » que sont étudiés ces deux programmes régionaux. L'un vise à soutenir des réseaux d'opérateurs locaux en Aquitaine, le second propose de soutenir financièrement des projets innovants au sein d'une série d'établissements de l'enseignement professionnel et agricole. Cette lecture permet de proposer un regard centré sur les élèves et leur bien-être. Elle souligne l'importance de l'expression des préférences par les élèves et de leur prise en compte par les acteurs institutionnels qu'ils soient opérateurs (enseignants, conseillers d'orientation, CPE, conseillers en insertion) ou décideurs publics. Au final, ce chapitre permet d'aborder la question du décrochage en identifiant et en liant les responsabilités collectives et individuelles. Au cœur de cette problématique croisée, la question du non-recours à l'offre publique émerge comme centrale.*

## **Keywords | Mots clés**

*Early school leaving, regional policies, capability approach, non take-up  
Décrochage scolaire, politiques régionales, approche par les capacités, non-recours*

## INTRODUCTION

This qualitative survey<sup>1</sup> conducted for the Workable<sup>2</sup> program in France deals with the regional policy aiming at reducing the school dropout. Our main objective here is to assess the relationship between the institutional capacity of local policy-makers and stakeholders; and the enhancement of individual capabilities. To conduct this analysis, we have worked on two different regional situations as one case study. This two-fold study will allow us to show the differences of political capacity and coordination building and the impact of such differences on the kind of services delivered to the beneficiaries.

Regarding governance, two key questions are guiding our research:

- What kind of changes has been introduced in local and regional governance?
- Did such changes improve public action and granted opportunities / conversion factors for young people?

The capability framework, as a normative theory, will provide not only an interest to the resources provided but will also assess how individual conversion factors are included or not in the design of the regional public policies. To evaluate this latter dimension, we focused our analysis on the perception of the program by pupils. This bottom-up analysis will allow us to understand how individual capabilities are strengthened or inhibited by public action

1 The authors would like to thank Sebastien Segas who has carefully read and reviewed a first version of this text and Amandine Brizio for her help in translating parts of the original report initially written in French.

2 The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme FP7/2007-2013 under grant agreement n°244909 (see Article II.30. of the Grant Agreement). This research is part of the Workable (Making capabilities work) program. Bridging quantitative and qualitative methods, the WorkAble research program assesses the potential of innovative strategies for dealing with local labour-market demands and regional inequalities. Adopting a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, it will systematically analyse whether and how young people are enabled to participate in working life and society. Applying the Capabilities Approach as a common heuristic framework, 13 partners from different disciplines (educational science, sociology, economics, philosophy, political studies and social work) in 10 European countries will collaborate closely in a multidimensional research process.

towards early school leavers. In that perspective, a specific attention was brought to the non take-up issue (i.e. the individual's refusal to use the resources proposed/offered by the institutional actors).

This research focuses on two experiments conducted by the regional councils of Rhône-Alpes and Aquitaine. These two programs share some converging elements: they are experimental, backed by a steering “partnership” and come to support local initiatives. However, the French regional councils have no formal competence in the field of educational policies but a series of recent contextual changes has opened a policy window for them in the field of school dropout:

- The fight against early school leaving has been recently put on the agenda and these policies remain very unstable;
- The regional councils are competent in the fields of vocational education and professional training. On this institutional basis, they have progressively invested the issue of school-to-work transitions and career security;
- The operational and financial resources of the Ministry of Education are subject to a significant decrease;
- At the start of these programs, the Regional Councils are mainly (a region near) governed by the opposition to the central government<sup>3</sup>.

The two regions that we have studied for this research are both involved in the implementation of a regional plan to fight against dropout financed by the Fonds d'Expérimentation pour la Jeunesse<sup>4</sup>. They are entitled “Plan régional de lutte contre le décrochage scolaire” (Regional Plan to fight against school dropout) in Rhône-Alpes and “Plan régional pour la persévérance scolaire” (Regional Plan for school retention) in Aquitaine. Two different logics of action emerge from these two programs: supporting existing local networks by a closer monitoring of the dropouts in Aquitaine and the provision of financial resources to secondary schools in logic dropout prevention in Rhône-Alpes. The Rhône-Alpes' regional plan aims at implementing preventive measures operating directly with young people through their educational

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3 The presidential election of May 2012 has changed this situation. Clarifying the respective responsibilities of the State and the Regions in the educational field is on the agenda of a third act of decentralization.

4 A national fund launched by the government in 2008 aiming at financing experimental local initiatives to improve vulnerable youth's condition.

institutions while the Aquitaine's program supports local networks of case managers in charge of the remediation of dropout.

### **Domestic context: dropouts as newcomers on the agenda**

In this regard, there seems to be two questions to be considered: how the dropout issue has been raised as a public problem, and what are the conditions of its inclusion on the political agenda, both at the national and regional level.

*Dropout as a public problem slowly emerges from a double motion of increase in qualification levels and transformation affecting unqualified employment*

Until the beginning of the years 2000, early school leaving was not a matter of concern for the French politicians. It started to change after the 2005 urban riots. An interrogation, or rather the observation of a paradox, comes into mind as soon as we consider dropout as a public problem. Usually, one would think a problem tends to become a matter of public policy when gaining significance in society, and weighting increasingly on social and political structures. Nonetheless, there is no denial that ever since their numbers have significantly decreased in France, school dropouts have never been more mentioned.

Proportion of dropouts in the active population [table 1]

	1980	1995	2005
<i>Youngsters with no diploma</i>	28%	15%	11%

*Source: Ministry of Education*

If on a strictly numerical basis, there are less school dropouts, one should look elsewhere for the reasons why the issue became a public problem (Gusfield, 1981).

A first set of justification can be found in the existence of educational norms, which make the continuing elevation of qualification levels one of the intangible objectives of education policies. However, short of considering that these norms proceed from a purely humanist and

philosophical aspiration, one must resort to a second, “upstream” order of justification that is one of the socio-economical conditions.

The issue at stake, contrary to what one could think, is not related to a shortage in low-skilled jobs. After a significant decrease during the 80s, low-skilled jobs bounced back in the mid 90s: in 2001, their share had returned to its 1982 levels, mostly due to a rise in the service industry. Hence the issue does not reside in a shortage of unskilled jobs but in a labour market increasingly adverse to marginalized youth. In other words, dropout has become a public problem mainly because access to the labour market is getting more complicated and difficult for school leavers, in a context of massive unemployment where young people constitute a very vulnerable category to the selective mechanisms of the labor market.

Indeed, with the elaboration of counter-selective policies – there have been countless measures and programs directed to young people ever since the first plan launched under PM Raymond Barre in 1977- and the objective of increased levels of qualification for young people, dropout has fully been established as a public problem. That is to say an issue considered as calling for “the intervention of the legitimate public authorities”.

Dropping out school without a qualification, which did not constitute an issue, has progressively become problematic and has gained a higher visibility on the public agenda.

### *A complex agenda-setting*

The drop-out issue is by now very high on the French political agenda. The process of agenda setting is a key issue when analyzing public policy. It marks the moment when a social issue shifts from the status of public problem to the status of governmental priority. As such, studying the timing of the agenda setting gives a snapshot of the interests and stakeholders, and of the perception of a social issue. Agenda setting also prefigures the solutions that will be offered to a specific issue. As often, knowledge and expertise have played a great role in this



process. Launching the public debates and measuring a social issue's importance – precluding its inscription on the agenda – implies a preliminary accumulation of knowledge. Let's recall that “dropping out” as a social phenomenon has been recognized only recently, first in the Region Rhône-Alpes at the founding conference organized in 1998 by the NGO La Bouture (Bloch and Gerde, 2004). Followed the *Interdepartmental call for tenders on dropping out* in 1999, whose studies paved the way for a first set of academic works on the dropout question and especially on the causes of this phenomenon (Glasman and Oeuvarard, 2011).

The inclusion on the agenda as such is even more recent and its timing proved to be highly significant: it happened concurrently to the urban riots of November 2005. Those riots opened a policy window of opportunity (Kingdon, 1984). In the aftermath of the events, public authorities put the issue of school dropouts on both national and local agendas. At the national level, the causality algorithms supporting the process of agenda setting deserve special attention. During the analysis of what caused the riots – resulting from a dialogue between experts and politicians (Center for Strategic Analysis and the French Senate in particular) –; failure at school was singled out on a set of social and political perceptions establishing a direct link with urban violence. In other words, a causal relation between dropping out and urban violence was established, over a background of presumed shortcomings in the guidance practices in school. This explains the importance of the security dimension in the French conception of dropout. The penalties directed to absentees' parents, for instance, embody such a dimension, as well as the part played by the French 'Préfets' in the concretization of the dropout's “*Système Interministériel d'Echanges d'Informations*” (SIEI, i.e. Interdepartmental Information Exchange System) and its local support platforms, or the fact that the most recent report on that topic (October 2011) was conducted by the *Mission permanente d'évaluation de la politique de prévention de la délinquance* (Standing committee for the evaluation of delinquency prevention policies).

Preventing delinquency and ensuring public safety seems to be one of the main goals when combating dropping out. Yet conceptions of drop-out as a social phenomenon and of public policies addressing the

matter have hardly stabilized. The unsteadiness of the words used in the scientific, expert and political discourses on the issue attests this. Paying attention to the categories used in public action means turning back to the wording that describe what is addressed by public policies. The words that are used surely matter, and reveal the conception of a social issue regulation. For example, it is obvious that the meaning differs slightly whether we speak of beneficiaries, users, public or clients for a social service. Words are indeed a powerful analytical tool.

It so happens that the dropout issue is overflowed with designations: disengagement, early school leaving, renouncing education, dropout, leaving school without diplomas, without qualifications, young people with no solutions, enrolled / non re-enrolled, invisibles, lost from sight, reconnection, education perseverance, or even the more recent acronyms such as JAMO (Youngsters with less opportunities) or NEET. This anthology raises interrogations on two different levels. What is the meaning of the recent hegemony of the dropout terminology that seems to take the lead in the French public space, in spite of its problematic local use? Second, remain the plurality of terms and the impossibility to single out one consensual and stabilized public action category, which both underline the limited intensity of public policy governance regarding the issue and lead us to our last contextual point.

### **Political context: unsteady governance for the policies of dropout prevention?**

The inscription of the dropout issue on the agenda occurred in a complex political landscape where different type of actors coexist:

- Government departments: ministries of education, labour and employment, and youth, as well as their sub national declinations, resulting from a poorly regulated deconcentration<sup>5</sup> process.
- Local governments and administrations: *conseil régionaux, généraux, municipaux*, (i.e. regional, department and city councils), whose legitimacy to intervene in this field remains uncertain.

5 Deconcentration and decentralization are understood here as different ways to foster territorialisation. Decentralization refers to the devolution of power to local elected entities, whereas deconcentration occurs when more autonomy is given to local civil servants of central administrations.

- Local guidance structures and networks: *missions locales, maisons de l'emploi, centres d'information et d'orientation, centres interinstitutionnels de bilan de competences* in charge of implementing these public policies

Such actors coexist on several territorial levels of government and cohabitate within intricate hierarchical and organizational relationships clearly stating the relevance of interrogating their governance.

The notion of governance designates “*a coordination process of actors, social groups and institutions in order to attain a set of objectives that have been discussed and collectively defined*” (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007, our translation).

As indicated by this definition, the issue of governance refers to a questioning where coordination and partnership play a central part. Hence the legitimacy of the following question: can we speak of governance when it comes to dealing with dropout?

At the systemic, or national level, numerous measures and instruments loosely coordinated and quickly outdated, decommissioned or scarcely financed, can be identified (Blaya, 2010 ; Bonnery, 2004).

At the local level, one can observe a profusion of experimentations, individual or collective initiatives, all characterized by a strong awareness for increased cooperation in public action. However, is the local political scale always the adequate one? Indeed, distortion effects push for concentrating investment on urban areas, whereas early school leavers are as numerous, if not more, in rural areas, but the absolute numbers often outweigh the ratios of dropout to the whole school population.

In any case, this short overview strongly raises the question of coordination and coherence in public policies designed to prevent dropout.

Social experimentation has recently been promoted as a tool for establishing links between different levels of government, while stimulating innovation. Experimentations have come to constitute a government strategy aiming at sustaining local programs for educational

completion, lead by the *Fond d'Expérimentation pour la Jeunesse* (i.e. Experimental Fund in favor of Youth, or FEJ)<sup>6</sup>. This is the subject of the present case study, regarding two regional experimentations designed to fight school dropout.

## **Our survey: two experimental programs fighting school dropout**

We have chosen to focus on two experimentations launched by two regional councils (NUTS 2), in the Rhône-Alpes and Aquitaine Regions. Both experimentations share common characteristics: they are experimental programs carried out by a regional council, resting on a partnership-based management, and supporting local initiatives. Regional councils are not traditionally involved in policies designed to fight dropout. Yet a series of contextual evolutions has opened a policy window for their action:

- Preventing dropout has recently been put on the agenda and this policy has hardly stabilized.
- Formation pertains to the region's competencies causing them to progressively invest the issues of guidance and professional integration. They have therefore gained significant institutional resources in organizing the prevention of dropout.
- The ministry of education's operational and financial resources have been strongly reduced.
- The political opposition to the central government<sup>7</sup> controls all regional councils (except for one).

Both regions under study are involved in the implementation of a regional

<sup>6</sup> *"The Fonds d'Expérimentation pour la Jeunesse (FEJ), created in 2009, is putting experimentation at the service of youth policies. It aims at enhancing school achievement of pupils and increases the social and professional integration of youngsters under 25. It finances innovating actions aimed at fulfilling the most important needs of youngsters. These experimentations bring together a program leader and an independent evaluator. The goal is to be able to assess the success of a new program before deciding its widespread implementation."* Consulted on: <http://www.jeunes.gouv.fr/ministere-1001/actions/fonds-d-experimentation-pour-la-1038> (Our translation).

<sup>7</sup> This case study was mainly conducted during the fall of 2011. The spring 2012's presidential and legislative elections have led to a majority shift at the national level.

plan against dropout, co-financed by the FEJ. Respectively, those plans are named:

- Regional plan for fighting dropout (Rhône Alpes)
- Regional plan in favor of school perseverance (Aquitaine)

Two distinct intervention dynamics appear in these two plans:

- Supporting existing local networks (that is acting on dropout though the improvement of dropouts follow-up in Aquitaine).
- Providing additional funds for the schools as means to prevent dropout in Rhône-Alpes

The Rhône-Alpes regional plan aims at directing immediately operational resources to young beneficiaries via their schools. The Aquitaine program comes as a support for existing networks and is consequently less visible to beneficiaries. This constitutes the main reason why the study was primarily focused on the Rhône-Alpes case, while the case in Aquitaine was to be alluded to as another possible type of intervention. Therefore the regional plan in Rhône-Alpes constitutes more or less the core of the study.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This case study has mainly rested at assessing the added value of such experimental programs. This added value is in turn analyzed on two separate levels: one of dropout regional policies' governance, and one of the effects of such policies on marginalized youth. In other words, the question was to know whether experimentation, in financially supporting schools in one case, and strengthening existing networks in the other, has produced structuring effects on the design of the regional policies fighting dropout and in the services delivered to the beneficiaries.

### **The capability approach: some milestones**

Focused on the exercise of real freedom defined as the actual capacity of the individual to choose a life he/she has reason to value, the capability

approach (CA) developed by Amartya Sen<sup>8</sup> has been chosen here as the core of our analytical approach. More than a theoretical framework, the CA is a “general methodological approach to dealing with inequality” (Sen, 1992, xii). It is presented by Amartya Sen in this way: “*The chosen approach concentrates on our capability to achieve valuable functionings that make up our lives, and more generally, our freedom to promote objectives we have reason to value*” (ibid., xi). Hence, in this approach, “*resources, goods and services, or the rights granted by formal institutions are analyzed in terms of achievements that a person can accomplish through them*” (Farvaque and Robeyns, 2005)<sup>9</sup>.

Thus taking the floor against the dominant economic theories, the capability approach claims that freedom is a value of the human development when it is associated with individual achievement and collective recognition. Thus, individual freedom is strongly related to opportunities offered by the community. In other words, the exercise of individual responsibility requires collective guarantees to ensure its practical exercise and fairness (Bonvin et Farvaque, 2008).

Often referred to as the capability or capabilities approach, it focuses on the capacity of individuals to accomplish the projects they “have reason to value” and the ways by which collective/political action enables or constraints this actual capacity. Sen’s approach thus leads to reassess the relationship between economic efficiency, political action, social justice and individual responsibility taking as a key indicator the effective freedom of individuals. To put it in a nutshell the individual responsibility should not be engaged if it is not supported by the reflexive empowerment that only the community can provide to individuals.

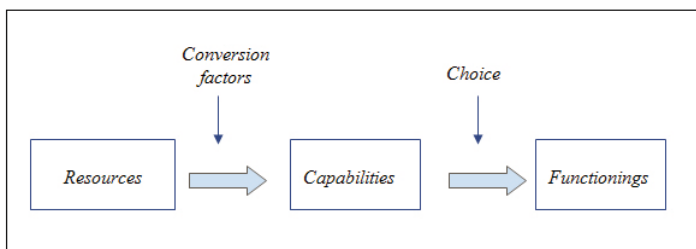
To fulfill this assessment of public action in terms of individual capabilities, Sen proposes a conceptual framework which we recall

8 Amartya Sen is an economist; he received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998 for his work on the theory of human development. His work has been widely recognized in development economics. However, it plunges into political philosophy its main features. In relation to liberal theories and contemporary individualism, he opted for a posture of testing the liberal paradigm by bringing it as far as possible. He develops thus a normative theory of freedom and society.

9 « *Les ressources, biens et services, ou les droits formels accordés par les institutions sont à analyser au regard des réalisations que la personne peut accomplir grâce à eux* » (our translation).

here the main features. He distinguishes in the first place between “functionings” being what individuals are actually performing and “capabilities” as functionings based on the real freedom of behavior. As an example, the functioning “not eating” can rely on an individual choice of fasting (capability), a moral or religious prescription more or less freely accepted or a pure constraint due to the lack of food in the case of starvation. The same action can thus jeopardize very different individual spaces of freedom. It is therefore of paramount importance to assess the actual capabilities of individuals and to base the public action on their promotion rather than on functionings (that is to say, the expected actions of individuals), or more precisely to link these two dimensions. However, the distribution of equal institutional resources meets very uneven individual capabilities. To measure this degree of inequality, Sen proposes the notion of “conversion factor” as the ability to transform these institutional resources into individual capabilities. In the lack of caring for such a match, public policies may encounter two pitfalls: to offer only formal rights or require standardized behavior without equitably distribute the opportunity to comply (functionings rather than capabilities). Public action in this case is characterized by a form of paradoxical injunction consisting in requiring a normatively defined behavior of the individuals but leaving aside the question of the actual capacity to meet these requirements.

The capability framework [figure 1]



Source: Verd, J., López Andreu, M., 2011

In respect with the effects on young people, three individual capabilities have been questioned:

- Capability for voice
- Capability for education
- Capability for work

## **Methodological insights**

The method used for the case studies is based on documentary analysis and a series of semi-structured interviews. The documentary analysis focuses on policy documents, study reports and review of scientific articles. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 3 categories of actors:

- Regional public authorities (regional council, *Rectorat*, etc.)
- Local operators (head teachers/ heads of school, teachers, guidance counselors)
- Pupils / pupils

Concerning the late category (pupils) we have conducted these interviews in three modes (individual face to face, small groups of 3-5 pupils, larger class group >10) on the basis of an interview guide focused on capability for voice/education/employment.

We have conducted a total of 45 semi-structured interviews during the summer and fall 2011 distributed among the following categories:

- Pupils: 18 individual or small group (2-3 pupils) interviews and 4 class interviews
- Local operators: 15 interviews
- Regional stakeholders: 8 interviews

Finally, as mentioned earlier our fieldwork is also comparative as we have chosen to study two regional action plans against school dropout (Aquitaine and Rhône Alpes). The first one is focusing on supporting existing local networks of actors, the second finances experimental actions conducted inside the teaching institutions. Although our methodology remained unchanged at the regional level, we adapted our interviews to this difference at the local level. In Aquitaine we have conducted our interviews with the local network's organizations. They



introduced us to a series of early school leavers' groups and individuals. In Rhône Alpes, the fieldwork was conducted vis-à-vis the teaching institutions and pupils included in the action plan implemented in this school. Our fieldwork in Rhône Alpes dealt with 5 teaching institutions in both the districts of Lyon and of Grenoble. We met with 2 vocational upper secondary schools from the public sector, 1 public agricultural college, 1 private agricultural college (*Maison familiale et rurale*) and finally one upper secondary school specialized in bringing dropouts back to school: the CLEPT (*Collège et Lycée Egalitaire Pour Tous*). For each of these institutions, we met the administrative staff, the teaching teams, the dropout monitoring teams (when existing) and several group of pupils.

## EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

### General findings

Regarding the questioning guiding the present study, we shall briefly summarize the results related to regional and local governance for the programs under observation. Results related to the effects on pupils in terms of capabilities will be addressed in the following section (beginning on p.23).

#### *Rhône-Alpes: presentation and overall results*

The regional plan in Rhône-Alpes consists in financing innovation within schools. It was launched in 2008 (on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> sessions) following the 2007 realizations of the workshops set up within the regional council. This plan has resulted from an agreement between the regional council (on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008), the Education Department (more precisely two of its regional sub-divisions or *Rectorats*), the regional directorate for food, agriculture and forests (DRAAF) and the regional network of the *missions locales* (i.e. local guidance structures dedicated to marginalized youth). The public problem addressed rests on a recent observation of the significant number of early school leavers with no qualifications. The analysis that prevailed in the regional council back then was that prevention should be favored, by supporting

schools in helping pupil to success. Hence a call for proposals was launched on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Its objectives were “to improve and develop prevention of school dropout in order to reduce the rates of early leave in professional training schemes. The applying schools were to submit an innovative approach for identifying and providing extra help for struggling pupils”.

In order to do so, the schools develop proposals based on the following approaches:

- “Identification, prevention and research for adequate solutions
- Tutoring
- Individualized follow-up process for pupils (when enrolling and beyond)
- Providing re-incentives and remobilization to pupils: allocating time for personal development through socialization, self-appreciation, competencies workshops
- In-depth counseling on guidance and academic choices.”

This plans was directed to both public and private secondary schools, vocational and agricultural. The call for proposals was open for three years (2008-2011) and had a global budget of € 1.5 million. Out of the 125 submissions, 91 projects have been selected, 80 of them carried out by a single school.

The services of the regional council have produced a general assessment of the plan. This record shows several significant observations

- The main topics of the funded programs have been: training for teachers, small group remobilization workshops, individual counseling for at-risk pupils, tutoring, as well as personal and inter-personal competencies development.
- 80% of the requests for funding have been regarding overtime pay
- Programs are mostly limited to one single school, and partnerships rarely extend to the information and guidance services such as the *missions locales*<sup>10</sup>, the centers for information and guidance (CIO)<sup>11</sup>,

10 The “*missions locales*” (Local missions for the professional insertion of youngsters) were created at the beginning of the 80’s and provide them with help on the matter of employment, but also training on housing and health.

11 The “*Centre d’Information et d’Orientation*” (Information and guidance centres)

- the *Maisons de l'emploi*<sup>12</sup>, etc.
- They often speak of families and pupil's involvement, but this is generally concretized by individual or collective information sessions.

The field survey conducted at the regional level and on each of the experimentation locations underlines the following observations on the program's governance. Regarding the regional plan et projects' management, one should first emphasize that the program fostered interest in the schools, since almost half of the 230 eligible schools in the area have taken positions and submitted applications. In a context of decreasing national public funding for secondary education, it appears that the subsidies offered by the regional council allowed for the funding of programs that could not be provided for by national policies. "*I think that globally, for the school involved, it has given them some air to breathe and has widened horizons a little*" (Interview at the regional council).

The founding partnership for the program, formalized in an agreement, has gathered around the regional council, the *Rectorat*, the Ministry of Agriculture and the network of *missions locales*. It appears according to the actors interviewed that such a regional partnership has been working to their satisfaction, provided two reservations:

1. The *missions locales*' involvement has been limited, due to a program design that focuses mainly on schools for both the regional plan and the programs submitted by the public, non-vocational secondary schools. "*When looking at the projects, what are you told? I will be very, very caricatural: if the pupil drops out, your job is to direct him to the mission locale. But it is our usual activity to take responsibility for these young people. What we would have wished for is the development, for instance, of direct permanent presence within the schools. Well, it was obvious that this was not an option*" (Interview at the regional coordination of *missions locales*)

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are ruled by the ministry of Education. They provide pupils (but also adults) with educational guidance and career information.

12 The "*Maisons de l'emploi*" (employment houses) are local agencies contributing to the public employment service.

2. The monitoring of the regional plan entrusted to the *Pôle Rhône-Alpes de l'Orientation* (i.e. guidance's network for Rhône-Alpes, or PRAO) included a mission of precise inventory of the dropouts in the region. However, the *Rectorat* have not shared the necessary extractions from their databases to make such calculations. This situation has created uneasy relationships between the regional council and the two *Rectorats*. *"So the evaluation, the PRAO's job, happened the way it could because they did not want to communicate their numbers. Objectively, it is problematic. Then, there was a big fear to reveal things threatening an institution that is already quite weakened. The more they fear, the more they lock up, and the more complex it gets, the more aggressive interpersonal relationships become."* As a result, the PRAO had to resort to other extrapolated statistical sources to perform its task. Two months before the end of the program (December 2011), the *Rectorat* was still unsteady: *"(...) sometimes generalizations have prevented understanding. This job here has not yet been a 100% completed by the PRAO's monitoring mission in order precisely to have at the same time a way of working and a type of good practice guide allowing us to define at a given time that these data, the conditions under which we can allow their diffusion if we add commentaries necessary to the correct understanding of them. Then these data, well, we can agree on publishing them. So this process is not yet finalized."* (Interview at the *Rectorat* of Lyon).

Regarding the systemic effects which have been observed on the schools, two elements can be pointed out, as recalled by the *Rectorat* de Lyon:

- A mobilization effect on the teaching and administrative staff involved within the schools, in a quite unfamiliar project framework in education. *"I think in terms of effect, the very first thing is that in participating in the plan, the schools say it helped us to tackle the issue. That is to say that as soon as they redacted a proposal, (...), it has had an internal mobilization effect."* (Interview at the *Rectorat* of Lyon).
- An awareness effect for teachers involved de facto in an internal program for fighting dropout, while the issue tends to be increasingly externalized towards non-academic operators (psycho-motor therapists, advisors in *Mission Générale d'Insertion*,

speech-language pathologist, etc...). “It did bring too, thanks to the means and the funding, I think it has an effect of overtime pay and so on, it allowed each Head of School to have the means to foster mobilization, especially with the teachers. That is the second effect”. (Interview at the *Rectorat* of Lyon).

In the end, the regional plan against school dropout will have instigated a project dynamic and initiated innovation (artistic activities, individualized support, cultural experimentations, etc.). The regional council’s action is set to continue with a new plan “in favor of return to school” launched in the spring of 2011, here again shaped as a call for proposals directed to local operators. Nonetheless two changes introduced by the new plan underline the shortcomings of the previous one. The change in semantics shifting from school dropout to return to school can mainly be accounted for by the will for appeasement with the *Rectorat*, which is not called into question anymore. Indeed, looking for the causes of school dropout means pointing out the academic system’s responsibilities. Looking for ways to favor a return to school seems far less accusatory and much more pro-active. The new call for proposal rests explicitly on the need for schools to establish partnerships with local operators (especially the *missions locales*). Such a constraining condition for eligibility highlights indirectly how low the external partnership dynamic was in the schools during the 2008-2011’s period. Yet the low number of responses to this second call for tender show the limited progress of a partnership dynamic within the schools.

### *Aquitaine: presentation and overall results*

The program initiated by the regional council in Aquitaine is untitled “*Networks for school perseverance*”. The wording “school perseverance” to designate dropout is quite unusual in France, yet frequently used in Québec. The beginning of the project in Aquitaine is related to a fact-finding mission conducted in Québec in 2006. When in 2008, the regional council considered getting involved in preventing school dropout, three territories were identified where pre-existed a cooperative dynamic between local stakeholders. Based on such findings, a second fact-finding trip in Quebec was commissioned with local stakeholders in the aim of stimulating the networks they were already involved in

or were to create. “So we identified those three territories and offered them the following deal: we will organize a mission to Québec (and I will provide you with an account of this mission in 2008), the deal is not to copy-paste what is done in Québec but we can draw inspiration from it, hear principles out, see work approaches and postures, and the deal is to come back in Aquitaine and with your operators, your projects in common, to try and put those methods into practice. So you will come together on a set of objectives defined in a charter, there are no directives, no framing, it is just a way to approach things, and then we will try and see to what extent you can work together” (Interview at the regional council)

The recollections from such a discovery trip have been published by the regional council’s agency, AREPA (Regional Agency for Continuing Education in Aquitaine), whose title indicates the main lesson drawn from it in terms of public policy: “Towards networks for success for every young people”. This is how the axis for regional policy has been defined, consisting in stimulating and providing tools for existing operators networks.

The network was launched in 2008, and has been the object of an experimentation co-financed by the FEJ during the 2008-2011 period. The objectives of this experimental approach consist in:

- *“Supporting and encouraging partnership and network-setting of distinct institutions, structures and organizations which are locally involved with “dropout”, so as to reinforce their cooperation for a better care provided to young people.*
- *Accompanying the three local and experimental networks for perseverance and success of young people in their areas, in their action for identification and monitoring of young dropouts, potential or actual, encountering difficulties in academics and / or insertion.”*

The main actions set up by the regional council in this plan are as follows:

- *“Recruiting an agent specifically dedicated to the management of regional policy for perseverance within the Directorate for education on April 1st 2010*
- *Organizing an international conference on perseverance on the 2<sup>nd</sup> to*

- 4<sup>th</sup> June 2010 (450 people involved)
- *Signing an agreement on local networks for perseverance between the Regional Institution, the Department for Youth and Bordeaux University II on August the 9<sup>th</sup> 2010*
  - *Mobilizing operators from the three experimental networks on plenary sessions: early September. During those meetings, the three networks expressed a need for staff support in order to animate the collective sessions, which triggered reallocation of funding.*
  - *Validating the decision of recruitment for three coordinators of the experimental networks”*

In Aquitaine, the project's implementation has been impacted by a global context of tension with the *Rectorat*. *“And the Rectorat always said that the Region was creating a program adverse to ours, they are outside of their competences, etc. (...) Of course the tension was obvious with the actors from the Education Nationale who were reluctant to discuss these issues with organizations they do not consider as relevant only to them, people whose relevance or expertise they do not recognize”* (Interview at the regional council). It is indeed quite likely that choosing to invest on the axis of network-building, rather than to intervene directly with the schools' policies as was done in Rhône-Alpes, is due to this particularly tense relationship between regional council and *Rectorat* on the dropout issue in 2008.

Putting the application together has at first been slightly chaotic, yet implementation began in 2009. Over the three targeted areas, two actually invested in the project while the third was finally not involved in the implementation as confirmed by the official in charge of the program: *“and for the Hauts de Garonne nothing happened”*.

Following requests from territorial operators, the main axis for action rests on recruiting two coordinators in charge of animation of the local networks and thus being able to dispense operational staff involved in preventing dropout of all bureaucratic and managerial tasks. Soon though, a second objective came alongside: developing an IT program shared on the local network scale in order to identify and monitor in real time young dropouts. This program, named SAFIRE (*Solution d'Accompagnement à la Formation, l'Insertion et la Réussite Éducative*

i.e. Support for Formation, Insertion and Academic Success Solution), has been developed on the territory of Blaye and implemented on the Marmande area. This development task, carried out by the coordinators recruited for the project, has been very favorably assessed by the local operators: *“This is an enormous work, it took him time, he went to all the schools so as to appoint referring operators for perseverance, trained academic staff to use Safire. Thus it is something that had a very positive impact, because alerts have been doubled”* (Interview at the mission locale de Blaye). *“It allows for more reactivity, because once you have fed the information to Safire, you just click on the name of the person you wish to contact, and with this click an email is systematically sent to these people who will go on Safire and look in detail on the file what happens with this kid. It also allows us to see whether they are kids under 16, they appear in red on the list, since they should normally be in school. It allows for establishing some kind of light statistics, but most of all to study whether they are at home or not. It could look a lot like policing, but it is not, it is only a tool for a much more rapid reaction than before, for not losing paper files as it used to happen sometimes, for not multiplying them either, and get in touch very quickly.”* (Interview at the center for information and guidance of Blaye).

The program’s two axis – coordinating local operators and implementing a monitoring device – collided with a state’s policy launched in February 2011. With a circular from the ministry of education (*Circulaire n° 2011-028 du 9-2-2011 Lutte contre le décrochage scolaire*), the French government introduced two new devices: local platforms for monitoring and support, and the SIEI (Interdepartmental System for Exchange of Information on dropouts). Those two measures, which local officials from state services will have to implement, brutally collided with the local experimentations realized in Aquitaine. *“We have been hit by this and de facto, we cannot keep our programs alive with the platforms since our operators are fully involved in the operationalisation of such state policy, and are compelled to implement it”* (Interview at the regional council).

In the end, the two staff members coordinating the networks will not see their contract renewed beyond the experimentation calendar (December 2011), and the future of the IT program SAFIRE is at the



very least uncertain, since operators in state services have been advised to favor the national SIEI program.

### *Common findings and divergences*

Regarding political results, and as the experimentations are coming to an end (generally by the end of the year 2011), here are our general findings:

- In terms of *institutionalization*: no extension or continuation of the projects as they are today have been considered at the end of the experimentation
- In terms of *partnership*: dropout appears as an issue strongly marked by political tensions between regional council and *Rectorat*, especially regarding data transmission on dropout and project management.
- In terms of *project management*: the collision of local and national agendas. Governmental initiatives (SIEI and local platforms) launched after the beginning of experimentations and particularly in respect to identifying dropouts, have impacted and sometimes destroyed local experimentations (Aquitaine)
- In terms of *relations to the beneficiaries*: Young people and their families have usually not been given a lot of time for voicing their concerns, even when targeting specifically the schools.

The global observation one can provide for both national and local levels is one of limited actions in time and space, strongly calling into questions the public action's continuity.

- For *decision-makers*: repeated competences overlap and conflicts play on the unstable margins of decentralization and national competences.
- For *operators*: local experimentations are very dynamic but they remain vulnerable to the institutional context in the Region.
- More generally, a picture of uncontrolled repetition for programs very often similar seems to come together.

## **An analytical view of the three relevant capabilities onto the case study**

As part of its plan against school dropout, the regional council of Rhône-Alpes has allocated funds in order to finance programs and actions within private or public vocational secondary schools or agricultural secondary schools. Are those programs vectors for reinforcement of capabilities in the words of Amartya Sen (Sen, 2000). To what extent and how do the resources allocated to school projects allow for an increase/ enhancement in the actor's actual freedoms, in this particular case pupils (Jean-Michel and Farvaque, 2008)?

The stakeholders (regional decision makers, heads of school, teachers and pupils touched by the issue of dropout) who have been concerned by our study have chosen to implement specific actions in order to prevent dropout. Each school has highlighted its priorities. Those probably strongly depend on the context (type and status, violence in the school...)

In order to underline more accurately this questioning on capabilities, we have widened the scope of our field study in Rhône-Alpes and integrated a school that does not belong to the program notably because its academic approach is quite atypical. We also have paid attention to another French Region, Aquitaine. Those two complementary fieldworks (school outside the regional plan and Région Aquitaine, see box 1 and 2) will nonetheless contribute to a better account of capabilities exercise for pupils involved in the Rhône-Alpes experimentation.

### **Aquitaine: acting on local networks**

Aquitaine has designed a plan for fighting school dropout quite distinct from the one by Rhône-Alpes. If Rhône-Alpes mostly aims at preventive actions regarding school dropout (by concerning pupils who encounter difficulties but who remain in school), the plan in Aquitaine acts in a more downstream way and encompasses in its scope pupils still in school as well as kids with no solutions, waiting for one or without recourses.

This network-setting plan allows, based on a close coverage of dropouts, to take into account the individual, as well as his cursus<sup>13</sup>, and from

13 The coordinator for the Marmande area noted: “*that is in that respect why I think we*

this a potential improvement of his or her capabilities. For one of the operators in Aquitaine, with such a networking, *“the pupil is the winner”*. Networking can improve capabilities and favor the care of dropouts without recourses: *“Here is the philosophy behind our approach, that is to say that we obtain a close coverage for schools to signal dropouts to us, that this signal generates care for those kids, and that this care is followed by an offer for solutions, whether return to school, vocational training or else (...). Those kids, if not entering the network, I think they would be provided with less care because they would not be here, we have made it our mission to contact all of them at least once, sometimes several by different structures, where the final objective is to make an offer, they accept or refuse but in any case we have the feeling we did our job (...)”*.

If, here and there, one can identify in dropouts discourses, existing capabilities for voice, education and work, it is nonetheless very difficult on the basis of interviews to objectively distinguish between what belongs to networking and on the other hand what constitutes the specific task of the insertion structure, particularly because dropouts have no information and are part of the plan<sup>14</sup>.

Nonetheless, they mention actual freedom and institutional flexibility regarding their choices for professional and/or school insertion:

*“Yes for sure when I come here, I really feel like people adapt to what I am looking for, they do not try to get me on another path, they make offers, I say yes or no. If I say no, they directly go to what I want to do. I think it really makes you trust them, given all the disappointments and all that. I really want to get a degree and for all this to be done after”*. (Dropout pupil in Aquitaine)

*“They offer things anyways, and then it is for us to see if it suits us or not. As you were saying before, it is free choice”*

(Do you feel like your choices are taken into account?)

*“Exactly. Let’s say that is the plan and then after with this, they provide guidance with different propositions, whether formation or structures, internships or anything else...Let’s say there are two parts, there is their part and then there is our one, we also have to do our share of the work, I mean still when you are in a partnership you have to know to adapt as they adapt to us. It is a dialogue”* (Dropout pupil in Aquitaine)

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*understood each other and the idea is to take into account all signals given by the young dropout, saying ‘here is a crack or a failure of the system and how can we try and fix it’, taking the kid’s views more into account and offering adequate solutions?”*

14 Which in turn reduces the dimension “capability for voice”.

One could make the hypothesis that such a “free choice” is more easily elaborated when the program rests on numerous available resources (passing information and plural solutions), due to the specter of partners with distinct horizons involved in the plan.

Finally, numerous operators highlight the issue of public transport and mobility for dropouts. It seems that networking has had little impact on such a variable, in so far as it cannot really act on factors of environmental conversion.

The submissions for the regional plan for fighting school dropout in Rhône-Alpes all aim at promoting academic success and the obtaining of a degree. Yet, when evaluated regarding the capabilities they develop (nature of capabilities: voice, education, work/ employment but also degree of development: adding a new and actual opportunity, or suppressing a previous constraint), they are quite different from one another. When picking “*the achievements people value the most*” (Bonvin, Farvaque 2008, p50, our translation) as an informational basis for judgment, some projects turn out to be “conforming” and others “enabling”.

The first type aims at putting pupils in conformity with the existing social norms of “getting a degree”, the second one targets pupil’s empowerment. The latter guarantee the freedom of individuals by offering them the possibility to transform the resources at their disposal –the right to education- in actual freedom –school cursus, degrees and skills they have reasons to value-. Those are ideal-types. Our observations underline that in the experimentations, the conditions for actual freedom are imperfectly met. The projects can act on one or another of its dimensions but none of them concurrently on resources and factors of conversion, whether individual, social or environmental.

### *Analyzing the regional programs in terms of capabilities*

Despite the fact that our interview guides were designed to shed light on the capability dimensions, we decided to implement a three steps process in order to operationalize the capability approach as an analytical tool for our empirical material. The first exploitation of our interviews focused on identifying in each of them the main aspects related to one of three capabilities (voice, education and work).

On this basis, a second exploration brought to light the transversal characteristics on each of those capabilities. We have then taken those transversal elements attempting to accurately translate the understanding of freedom in its process-based aspects (democratic participation) and of social justice (choice between a plurality of value functioning or adaptive preferences).

### *Capability for voice*

Conceived here as the capacity to freely express one's preferences and have them institutionally recognized, the voicing capability can be a crucial element of some projects. A capacitating project in terms of voice is one that implies, according to us, the active involvement of pupils but grants them the freedom not to participate. More generally, a project will be enabling if its operation is one of value in the pupil's mind. Pupils are not compelled to participate to experimental programs. They are invited to get involved and therefore have good information (families nonetheless have less systematic access to information). The plan targets pupils with the more difficulties yet it does not identify<sup>15</sup> them. They are granted easy access to the program (free access) and the organization takes into account their constraints (timetables, public transportation, living conditions...) and what they appreciate and give value to. Pupils can be a force of proposal, for the choice of a school field-trip, or for the timing and the discipline of tutoring for instance.

Voice can also be absent in some projects. In such cases, pupils have no or very little information on the different aspects or on the existence of the project, and when they have gotten any, it remained unclear. The fact that they actually understood the project does not seem to have been verified. Pupils for instance think they are getting grades for the tests they are given, and have only a very vague idea of what they could be used for (ROC and LYCAM<sup>16</sup>). It was very salient from the interviews with pupils benefiting from this type of projects that what was done bore no value nor had any use to them. The different parts of the project have been conceived without their input and pupils are threatened into participating for fear of exclusion. To them, the only way to express themselves is an institutionalized one, through the "délégués de classe"

<sup>15</sup> Thus preventing for stigmatization as a reason for non take-up.

<sup>16</sup> ROC : collective spelling identification. LYCAM : lycée ça m'intéresse (or I am interested in secondary school), test for indentifying dropout risks.

or pupil deputies. Outside of such representation, they have no voice granted to them.

Capability for voice in projects for schools under study  
(from the pupil's point of view) [table 2]

Schools/Classes	Participation	Opportunities					
		Information		Access			
		Pupils	Families	Free	Easy	Adaptative	Non-stigmatizing
CHESSY	X	X		X	X	X	
SEGUIN 2 <sup>nd</sup> e TU							
SEGUIN 1 <sup>ère</sup> TU							
MONTRAVEL	X	X		X	X	X	
LUTHER KING		X		X		X	
CLEPT (cf. encadré)	X	X			X	X	X

*Access*<sup>17</sup>

*Non-stigmatizing*<sup>18</sup>

From the operator's point of view, voice seems to be present to different extents, and under distinct forms from one school to another. The Maison Familiale et Rurale de Chessy (Family Rural House for Chessy) has opened spaces for listening and expression for 3<sup>rd</sup> years, for instance, and instituted sharing groups for pupils. Besides, psychological support has been set up for voluntary participants, which can choose the place and the subject of those sessions.

The agricultural secondary school of Montravel makes space for capability for voice: based on free expression, pupils involved in field-trips, mentoring and tutoring scheme jointly elaborated by adults and young people<sup>5</sup>. In the vocational secondary school Martin Luther King, voice might be less dominant in the operator's discourses. The school organizes tutoring on a voluntary basis. When being tutored by the school non-teaching staff, pupils can pick the topics they wish to

17 Access to the action:

- Free: no constraints to participate
- Easy: means offered to guarantee access to the resource
- Adaptive: access to the resource is adapted to the youngster's needs and constraints.

18 Some projects target some group of pupils. They point them as being in difficulties. If above this they are forced to participate then it becomes obvious that exclusion is added to stigmatization!

study. In the vocational secondary school Marcel Seguin, the analysis of interviews with heads of school and teachers matches the one for the pupils. Indeed, they mention very scarcely the dimension of capability for voice. Outside of the induction week when pupils are given individual meetings and sessions are organized with families, added to the fact that a pupil can refuse individual care, the indicators for voice are largely absent.

### **The CLEPT: a “capability for voice friendly” school?**

The Collège Lycée Elitaire pour Tous (CLEPT or loosely translated the Elite secondary school for all) is an experimental school. It offers alternative approaches to education for dropouts (they have an average 18 months lost before getting into the CLEPT). Small groups, tutoring, step-by-step assessments, writing workshops, academic and cultural sessions, initiation to philosophy, are some of the many devices designed to promote “*the construction of youngster’s own authority in acts, an on-being acting on its own citizenship and its own learning processes.*” (www.clept.org, our translation).

This box does not aim at describing its whole action, but to illustrate from the voice point of view, how they confront the issue of developing such capability (Bloch and Gerde, 2004).

We have met pupils from one basic group (all grades and number of years enrolled) and some of the teaching staff. The interviews show that developing capability for voice is at the very heart of the educational approach. The “*rules of the CLEPT (...) are jointly constructed*”. They imply “*working all year long*”, can be adjusted depending on the pupils, “*we hear what they have to say*” (teacher) and is given incentives: “*they will not get shut down because they said something outside of the question asked, badly formulated, so speech is risk-free*” (teacher)

A pupil confirms: “*Regarding self-expression, first you need to know that already in our timetables we have slots, just like for groups, what we are doing now, where self-expression turns around the table, on news, internal issues for the CLEPT. We also have a “vie de classe” happening every week. I know of some schools where the “vie de classe” is every six months, I exaggerate but really it is very little. Here again, it is a space where we can really express ourselves. Then we have the tutoring, that is to say the teachers are tutoring us and besides we can express ourselves*

*but it is in a more personal context.”*

The CLEPT appears to be a school where the pupil is “*an interlocutor with authority to be, to say and to do*” (www.clept.org)

The collective interview session conducted with the pupils of the CLEPT has illustrated such a point of view. Contrary to the other interviews conducted in all other schools under study, pupils at the CLEPT are neither noisy, undisciplined nor distant. They respect the speaking-time allocated to each of them. They listen to each other, don't interrupt and do not hesitate to speak up. They make their own point and are open to collective deliberation. At the end of the session, we have offered -as in every interview conducted with pupils- to give them time for any questions they might have. There again, the maturity of questions has been surprising. They wished to know who we were directing the study to, and what will concretely happen for young people, as well as whether EU institution can act on education. Those questions contrasted with the more personal ones we got elsewhere (How much do you earn ? How long did you study for? What car do you own?)

### *Capability for education*

The capability for education is defined here as the ability to choose a self-valued curriculum.

The pupils perceive capability for education mainly as an instrumental device in service of a substantial one. To them diplomas matter to get a job, even a better one. The Baccalauréat (A-level) is envisaged here as a conversion factor, increasing their positive ability to do something worth doing. The social norm does indeed make it crucial to get this degree in order to access the job market more securely.

For the majority, being successful at school is valuable. The domination of the educational norms does not escape pupils. In order to guarantee the achievements they desire: to get “*good wages, a family, a job*” (pupils from vocational secondary school), they know a definite level of education or qualification is compulsory. Beyond such level, their situation would be unacceptable in terms of well-being: “*with no education, you have no job, you don't manage (...), your life is a waste*” (pupils from vocation school). Education is not an end but the means



to choose a way of life. In the hierarchy of choices we submitted them, “completing education” comes for most of them before “getting a job”. Ideally, a capacitating project would guarantee that pupils would obtain a valuable degree, which would provide them with opportunities for continuing their education. In reality, a project can develop access to degrees through “individual conversion factors”. The help provided is then academic and psychological. Attention is focused on the individual, in supporting his/her self-esteem, help to study, tutoring in some subjects where he/she encounters the most difficulties, or even mentoring the elaboration of a career aspiration of value for him or her. Yet such projects impact the beneficiary after a series of choices sometimes strongly forced on them. Pupils might have been enrolled<sup>19</sup> in a curriculum they did not choose. It is thus virtually impossible to witness any capability development. The regional plan impacts possibilities predetermined by the education system constraints.

In a number of schools under study, even when pupils do say they feel at ease, they can be here “*as a last resort*” or on their ... “*5<sup>th</sup> choice*” (pupils from vocational secondary schools). Agricultural education might have been chosen for its alternative academic approach, as a solution to failure to continue education in other schools. In itself, agricultural education is capacitating, since it gets numerous pupils a qualification they would not have as certainly obtained otherwise.

In Aquitaine the regional plan’s target is focused on youngsters after they dropout and do not act inside the teaching institutions. Its aim is to sustain the existing networks of social workers, educators, guidance counselors. When studying the capability for voice of the youngsters, it is obvious that their voice was very low during schooling and remains still very low during the dropout period. The capability for voice of these vulnerable youngsters was and remains very weak.

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<sup>19</sup> In France, the “allocation process” resulting in such enrollments consist in matching teacher’s decisions and available slots within each school. First, decisions reached in « *conseils de classe* » (instances gathering teachers, heads of school, pupils and family delegates) can go against the wishes formulated by pupils. Second, the classes asked for can be unavailable (popular classes, bad track record or both). The administration will then offer a slot in classes where there are still open slots.

Capability for education in projects for schools under study  
(from the pupil's point of view) [table 3]

Schools/Classes	Teacher's commitment	Perception of the help received as centered on					Expands the range of choices
		Well-being at school	Learning	Getting a diploma	Study follow up	Education to choice and career guidance	
CHESSY	X	X	X	X	X		X
SEGUIN 2 <sup>nd</sup> e TU			X	X			
SEGUIN 1 <sup>ère</sup> TU			X	X			
MONTRAVEL	X	X		X			
LUTHER KING	X		X	X	X		
CLEPT (cf. encadré)	X	X		X	X		X

Teachers and heads of school do not all mention, at least explicitly, a concern for developing capabilities for education. In its discourses, a school like the vocational school Marcel Seguin seemed non-vocal in that respect. However, some schools do put at the heart of their projects the interest for education. Pupils should “*feel well in their/ at school*”, enjoy academics again (Lycée de Montravel), get back the pleasure which will make them return to the education system. They can focus on contents, on meaning or interest of education. Teachers from the vocational school Martin Luther King explain: “*We French language teachers often see that the one who will make it professionally is first someone who can make the language its own: that is to say that he is able to say what he wants, to formulate a need, to understand and thus this disqualification of French in vocational schools reinforces the idea of a second-class subject, it is then much more difficult for us to demonstrate its interest. In the end pupils are quite happy to tell themselves that French is not an important subject*”. Besides, for this school, the issue at stake is to provide a type of affirmative action by allocating in priority new migrants to the program. In other words, the school is trying to promote more conversion factors for those who might be the most impeded to complete their education.

### *Capability for work*

The capability for work is conceived here as the actual possibility to

choose a job or a career, one has reasons to value.

The Rhône-Alpes' program is carried out within the schools. It is by definition more focused on education than employment. However, all the pupils we have met are already very concerned with their insertion on the labour market. This project could be considered as guaranteeing a functioning: getting a job. But is it always a self-valued functioning? In order to answer these questions, let's quote a very typical interview.

**Celia**

We met Celia on the sidewalk in front of the high school a day of exam. She expresses very accurately the adaptive preferences and the importance of getting a job above all:

*The final objective is to find a job?*

Of course (silence).

(The silence following the statement reveals heavy constraints, when listening to the next answer:)

*So do you know what you want to be?*

"Well I enrolled in accounting, I take classes in vocational training for accounting, if I keep it up I think I will end up as an accountant".

(Ending up in accounting! In colloquial French it does not convey any sense of gratification. Ending happens when there is no more hope. You don't end up a millionaire; you end up homeless. Here lies all the weight of resignation. The words "adaptive preference" do apply here, which the rest of the interview confirms:)

*Were you the one to choose?*

Basically, no. It was my last resort.

*What would you have wanted to do?*

Social worker

*And it was not accepted?*

I have not been accepted in secondary schools -clears her throat- I was not good enough in sciences so well, I applied here, in accounting

(But they stay in the game and complete education because it matters in order to get a job)

*Is it important for you to continue your education after secondary school?*

Anyways, you got to! (laughs), that's what you need now to get a job.

*Is it important to you to get a degree in order to get a job?*

Personally I think, employers ask for diplomas anyways so after to get a job you automatically have to get one.

Capability for work in projects in the schools under study  
(from the pupil's point of view") [table 4]

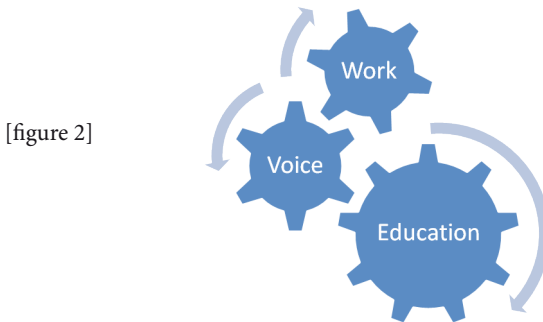
Schools/Classes	Project perceived as centered on helping to reach the chosen job	Project perceived as <i>also</i> fostering job attainment	Project perceived as expanding the possibilities of choice in employment
CHESSY	X		
SEGUIN 2 <sup>nde</sup> TU		X	
SEGUIN 1 <sup>ère</sup> TU		X	
MONTRAVEL		X	
LUTHER KING			
CLEPT (cf. encadré)	X		X

Similarly to the way operators did not seem in their discourses to deliberately develop capabilities for education, all operators do not emphasize the capability for work dimension. Some openly mention capabilities for employment: in the MFR of Chessy, some allude to the work done on the professional project, in addition to the regional plan and the acquisition of job description flyers, as an additional resource to the numerical documentation. If in the following excerpt, the teachers in the vocational upper secondary school Marc Seguin do reach the idea of capabilities for education, but in their mind, it appears to be submitted to a capability for work first strategy: “(...) *the idea was to get the pupils identified either as absentees, or not following in class, having make up for skipped classes or not paying attention in class, to talk to them in private for a week, get them out of the classroom, and work with them on their individual aspirations, their professional project, giving meaning to their attendance in school and work on classes contents too. (...) So in the beginning we thought that a pupil who had already acquired professional skills could make sense of this by speaking to the newcomers, so they ended up as a professional big brother, or on the opposite pupils unhooked to their classes and who did not register information, could meet with senior pupils who already possess real professional skills in order to see what they might achieve if they got to work (...) we could establish in advance and depending on the pupil's profile, working both to remedy gaps in some subjects, and working towards the elaboration of an individual personal and professional project leading to reconcile the pupil and the school, and fully integrating its formation*” (Teacher in

vocational secondary school).

Consequently, in terms of capabilities, this particular school is in an opposite position. Capabilities for work appear to come first because providing motivation to pupils, giving them the ability to act is primarily channeled through the discovery of jobs. The issue of access to employment seems to condition the desire and the will to get an education, maybe contrary to what happens in other schools such as agricultural school Montravel or vocational school Martin Luther King where operators are first concerned with a will to study and an ability to interact within the school, in order to possibly develop capabilities for work later: “Take G.’s example, he is a typical case of failing kid who did even want to study anymore, and then: bad grades over bad grades, he did not feel like studying, he gave up. Whereas now, he got successful again, so we got into a virtuous circle, good grades over good grades, he wants to study a little more, and so on. These are two extremes, we have great examples, and the bonus is already to get them to come to school, to feel happy within the walls. It is the first gain” (Teacher Montravel’s Agricultural secondary school)

\*How capabilities for voice, education and work are related



Our observations show a direct link between this weakness in terms of voice and the two other capabilities. Our case study suggests here that a weak performance at school is generally related to a poor capability for voice. Some works in the sociology of education have shown that the pupil’s guidance choices are more often built in response to the aspiration of the families than on taking on consideration their own educational achievements (Vallet, Duru-Bellat, 1990). Logically then,

at equal school performance, the children from privileged families make more ambitious choices than those of vulnerable families. The capability for voice of the first is more important in that sense. Hence, this weakness in voicing results in difficulties when it comes to guidance choices: “*at the beginning I wanted to do car mechanics but I have been sent in agriculture*” (Manu, *mission locale* of Marmande). “*at first I was supposed to go in general education but in cinema studies at the Montesquieu high school. The thing is that this high school was very sought after with little room left, it was very hard to get in, it didn’t work*” (Mylène, CIO of Blaye). We could easily multiply the examples; misfits and constraints in school-based guidance are present in nearly all of our interviews.

In the absence of choice concerning school, we find an instrumental capability for work. By this, we mean that the transition onto the labour market is conceived as a solution to school problems especially in the case of apprenticeship or on the job training. In that situation, all the functionings related to the work capability are not fully graspable. There is in that sense a strong relation between capabilities for education and work: weak performances in education result *in fine* in a weakened capability for work. In Aquitaine, perhaps more clearly than in Rhône-Alpes because they are already out of school, the youngsters we have met express it very clearly:

#### Manu & Guy

Manu and Guy are two dropouts we met at the *mission locale* of Marmande

***What is your priority: employment or education?***

Manu: Both, I put both because without education you can’t find a job, without a job no way to get training, it works in both directions

Guy: and without money you have no life

M: Exactly and now that’s the way it works. When we say we work to get blossomed first and for money in a second row, that might have been true a long time ago. Now we don’t work for blossoming but to earn money! To know if by the end of the month we’ll be ok, if we’ll have enough to eat rather than to get blossomed! You have to tell things the way they are and I think it’s gonna get worse and worse.

***So you associate education and better job***

M: Exactly!

***So the priority is not necessarily to get a job?***

G: Well, as I told you both are tied, it works like a train

***That goes first by the education station?***

M: Exactly.

**Antoine**

The case of Antoine is significant of the relation between the three capabilities. We meet Antoine at the *mission locale*. Invited to meet us without knowing exactly the purpose of our work, Antoine came because he was asked to.

*And the idea to start an apprenticeship, was that your idea?*

I don't like school, so... I asked for a BAC pro<sup>20</sup> but I have not been taken.

*Do you regret it? Was that what you were looking for?*

Yeah of course

*How was that explained to you?*

Well, first, how can I say, I did not have the good results, I was underscoring!

**Jerôme**

Jerôme has a degree in vocational education (woodwork), he tells us more about the weakness of voice:

They proposed me some firms.

*And what you are proposed, does it really look like what you want to do?*

It's not exactly the same but it's close.

*And if you are not interested, do you say so? How does it work?*

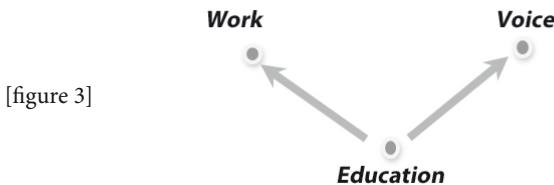
No, but after you can get a second thought about it. I do not necessarily agree but I think about it.

*Have you ever said no?*

Not so far

To sum up, we can say that in France the capabilities for voice and work are bound to the capability for education. We can illustrate these intertwined relations by the following figures.

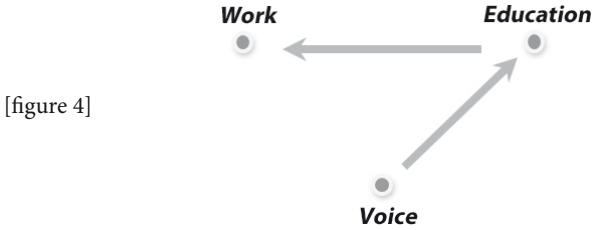
A weak capability for education results in lowering down the two other capabilities while, on the contrary, a strong capability for education drags up and reinforces voice and work



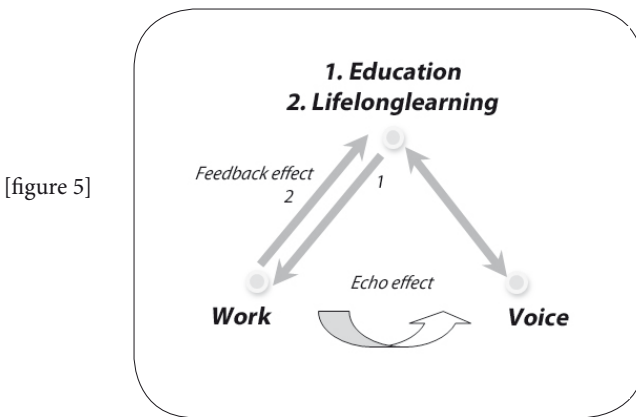
But it should be reminded that with the same performance at school, the children coming from well-off families get better diplomas than those

<sup>20</sup> Vocational education degree comparable to A level.

coming from poorer families. The first are able to express themselves (they show their guidance preferences, the act to put pressure, mobilize their social networks, etc.) when the second are not able to do so. In that sense, the voicing resource also acts upon the capability for education.



A weak capability for work also leads in echo to a poor voicing capability. By feedback effect, this process impacts the capability to access longlife education through training.

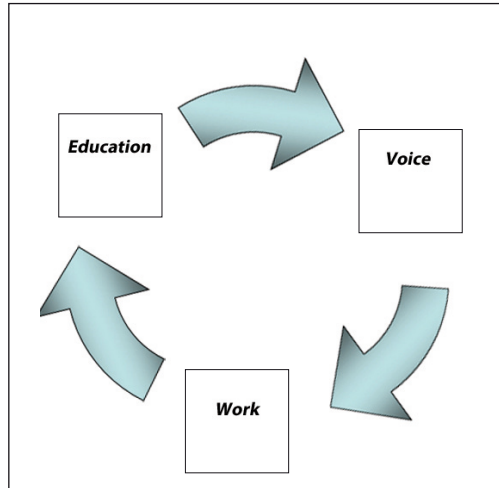


These effects tend to institutionalize in a permanent way if nothing comes to counterbalance the initial individual/social situation: education or belonging to a given social category on the capability for voice<sup>21</sup>. In other words, the three capabilities are clearly bound together; they act upon each other in different ways that have to be understood in a temporal perspective.

21 Pierre Bourdieu's works have established the relation between school and social hierarchies. Although they are well known in France they remain all but theoretical. The social and educational structures are still strongly linked (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970).



[figure 6]



*Resources and vulnerability: what kind of achievement may be reached?*

What do we learn from our fieldwork in terms of achievement and vulnerability? To answer this question, we must try to identify if what the pupils achieve correspond to what they wanted to achieve. In that case the conditions for an increased freedom would be present.

First it should be noticed that the “schooling situation”<sup>22</sup> supporting the projects rarely leaves room for a deliberate choice of the children. These projects intervene at a moment when the guidance choices have been generally made, the pupils are engaged in their high school and if a constraint was preexisting, it will be remaining. The projects have not been conceived to reduce the initial/individual constraints but to prevent dropout. The only freedom given to the youngsters is this one: not to be forced to dropout whether they have chosen or not this school, this path or this diploma. By this they are supposed to increase their chance of getting the given diploma. So the question might only be: *do this project enhance or lower this embedded “freedom”?*

<sup>22</sup> By this we mean the mix composed of the teaching institution, the educational curriculum and the targeted diploma.

The means to convert the given resources into capabilities might sometimes be unexpected. For example, supporting a pupil until he gets his diploma even in a prescribed curriculum (and of course requesting from him a strong adaptive preference) might allow him afterwards to pursue his educational career in a more chosen way. The initial diploma acts as sesame, the support he gets might be considered in itself as a conversion factor. By supporting a self-valued achievement in the medium term, the project finally increases a positive freedom.

But, the means associated to this supports are among the first conversion factors. If the means are of the same kind than those producing the dropout, the project will probably not be capacitating. For example, using writing as pedagogical means might be inefficient if not worse when it is managed with pupils showing difficulties in spelling. Some youngsters told us they needed help but were not able to find any usefulness in the proposed one: *“It’s always the same thing. We see what is done inside the program and frankly I don’t need this. I can handle this myself. And you would like to have another kind of help? Yes may be. Like what? Yes some... well in fact I don’t really know what kind of help”* (Pupil in final year of vocational upper secondary school).

On the contrary, learning basic skills in vocational school, fight against educational miserabilism (downgraded education for marginalized youngsters, lightened cursus, lowered evaluations, etc.) can increase the attraction and the pupil’s involvement in the program. Even if the fact of being there reflects an initial adaptive preference, it still can work and the pupils might not dropout.

These considerations lead us a step further in questioning what we mean by vulnerable. In a recent article (Ferrarese, 2009) on the care issue, Estelle Ferrarese makes a link between vulnerability and institutional help that *“always protect, in their organization, some and expose others”*. Then it should be accurate, from a political point of view, to *“fight the conditions by which certain lives are more exposed than others”* (Ferrarese, 2009, 136, our translation).

Viewed this way, our case study is questioning. Do the studied programs intend to fight or regulate vulnerability?

First of all, it would probably be necessary to define precisely what we mean by vulnerability. Second, this should lead us to consider a further hypothesis. If participating to a program targeted on a declared “vulnerable” category can lead to assume a depreciated identity, and then non taking-up, the program could be explained by the rejection of such an identification process.

### *Constraints and limits to capabilities development*

In spite of the projects, numerous constraints remain within the schools and the absence of conversion factors limits the pupil’s capabilities. First of all, enrollment is not for some of them any kind of choice. Even before benefiting from the plan, operators have highlighted this set of initial constraints. Besides, if indeed all programs allow for participation or not, it appears clear that, at the same time, some pupils can be prevented and/ or dissuaded to participate. For instance activities aiming at professional insertion can disrupt the project: *“I guess I started with them, it must have been mid-December. It did not start right away. Over the academic year we did not have much, because they are pupils who often go out on internships. So I suppose I spoke to them maybe 20 times tops, no more”* (Vocational School supervisor). Other pupils also have to provide for themselves and have a job. Sometimes, tutoring hours conflict with the fact that *“teachers and pupils are submerged with classes”* (Head of school, vocational upper secondary School). Long hours in transportation between the schools and their homes can also be a strong disincentive for pupils.

Regardless of the projects themselves, environments seem to have an impact as an exogenous variable on capability deployment (location of the school, pupil’s problems). Such examples (jobs in addition to full-time education, geographical distance) tend to demonstrate that deploying capabilities for voice, work and education cannot be reduced to regional plans and projects, and would in all probability necessitate horizontal policies or developing conversion factors, on an individual but also social and environmental level. The interviews with pupils/operators/decision-makers illustrate that the most successful conversion factors are individual ones in those programs: tutoring, building-up self worth, widening what is expected to be academic

knowledge. Thus, additional funding from policy for urban cohesion or family would provide some of the pupils with more opportunities and choices in their curriculum.

Moreover, the interviews contribute to identify ideas and programs that could foster capability development in ways that are not necessarily taken into account in the program. Indeed, some of the financial support allocated to generate academic success could be translated into conversion factors, some of which might lie outside the project's scope:

- 2011 was the first academic year for the implementation of the Baccalauréat Professionnel reform. Within one school, a shortened cursus (from 4 to 3 years) has gathered in the same year pupils completing the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year of their Brevet d'Enseignement Professionnel. The newcomers have enjoyed the support of their elders, more advanced in technical matters.
- In order to promote academic success, those pupils call for less overcrowded classrooms. This would in their opinion help teachers to take care of each of them, and not just of the best of them.
- The atmosphere<sup>23</sup> also appears to be a crucial variable. The fact that they get along well improves their academic results, as underlined by some pupils. Within the structure, it is a bonus that the teaching staff is not the only supporter of struggling pupils.

More generally, in order to improve their education, according to what the pupils told us, variables that matter are:

- Supporting the learning process throughout the whole academic cursus
- Providing guidance that would not be constrained by overbearing concerns for filling-up classes
- A timetable taking into accounts their travel time and transports difficulties. Teachers are well aware of the issue but lack appropriate solutions
- Consultation when it comes to changes in internal rules organizing life at school
- An approach to teaching less focused on written skills

<sup>23</sup> Concept referred to the work of the sociology of education that address the school "as an organization that has a particular style, modes of specific social relations and its capacity to mobilize actors and resources of its own" (Duru-Bellat Mingat, 1988).

### *The “non-take up” issue*

By this we mean the action of “*any individual who -in any case – does not benefit from a public offer, of rights or services, to which they are entitled*” (Observatoire des non-recours aux droits et aux services, <http://odenore.msh-alpes.fr/>) (Our translation).

Non taking-up should naturally be a crucial issue when analyzing in terms of capabilities but it is extremely difficult to measure the extent of the phenomenon of non-take up regarding dropout. A recent study conducted in Rhône-Alpes<sup>24</sup> showed that such a dynamic can last for long, since young dropouts stay on average 29 months without claiming for the services they are entitled to. For the two regional programs we studied, we have observed an uneven awareness of non-take up. In Aquitaine the plan focuses on network building for operators who are directly involved with the social effects of dropout. Non-take up for services that could prevent dropout is a very pressing concern there. In Rhône-Alpes the plan concentrates on the schools, where one could be led to think everything is still possible and things are less terrible. Non-take up would then be of less importance.

Youngsters have some very good reasons to refuse the “benefits” of the programs proposed to them. For example, in some schools, when pupils do not take advantage of a service, they bring forward the issue of time, the service being outside their timetable. It adds up to already numerous hours of class.

Some services can also cast a specific identity on someone, “struggling pupil”, “dropout”, all derogatory labels. Targeting the program may bring in a risk of excluding as well, the dark side of positive action. If they are a priori considered as “deficient”, or lacking in some respect, and not like responsible individuals, pupils resist.

In their design as well as their implementation, the programs have to imply autonomy or take the risk of no guaranteed involvement. Pupils can be made to participate but they do not benefit from it, do not see

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24 Mission Régionale d’Information sur les Exclusions, « Entre école et mission locale » Dossier d’étude de la MRIE, décembre 2011.

what it is for and experience it as rejection: “*it feels like we have been sacked*” (pupil in vocational school).

Pupils resort to these programs when they are directly focused on academic skills. The use of the service is then obvious. On the opposite, activities that are not directly centered upon academics (cultural or artistic) can be a powerful motivation for some. According to them, a new routine is a source of motivation. Getting involved in activities where success comes more easily can trigger self worth, reassurance, be a means to make up in academics later on. This could be seen as one of the indirect uses for such services.

An easy access to services is of equal importance. It is a conversion factor. Resources must be available easily if needed. It happens when access is open with a simple request, at any time and where their concerns are taken into consideration. Uneasy access to the program is also a valid reason for non taking-up

Related to the topic of the non take-up, a significant number of paths to dropout find their origin in a kind of withdrawal even before being allowed to access the program<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand, by trying to escape from educational vulnerability, the program may generate some forms of dependency to the given help. Withdrawing from this dependency may well be a kind of reflexive non take-up.

To conclude, in terms of capabilities, the plan in Rhône-Alpes aims mainly at enhancing the capability for education, which in France means graduation. The call for proposals directed to the schools did not contain any indications regarding what conversion factors should be mobilized. This intentionally unclear formulation should have allowed for innovation. In fact, the projects have rarely been innovative. Almost half of them (45%) are currently funding teaching hours.

With individual conversion factors, the projects carried out in the schools contribute to make a kid into a pupil, helping him or her to complete education with more assurances. Still there is a graduation

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25 By this we mean the lacks in basic skills, school failure being a major cause of dropping out.

(from less enabling to more) on the nature of the pupil's project. Excepted in one atypical school led by activists, such project is usually the result of "adaptive preferences". In order to safeguard their right to graduation, they adapt their preferences to the possibilities offered to them. Interviews do illustrate this: within a very large set of options in France, struggling pupils are only offered a choice between devalued cursus (they hold no value in their mind but not exclusively since these cursus all have recruitment deficits).

To sum up, if the regional plan can be conceived as a social conversion factor transforming a formal right (graduation) into a real one (actually getting a degree) through allocating resources (funds directed to schools or pupils); then we must observe that services allowing the beneficiary to pick what he thinks suits him best are scarce, and environmental conversion factors often absent.

## CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The French case study allows us to draw some conclusions both on the governance of educational policies to reduce early school leaving and on the analysis of existing programs in terms of capabilities.

The first conclusion to be drawn in institutional terms is that there is no coherent public policy towards dropouts. Brought very recently on the political agenda above all in terms of public safety, the subject of early school leaving has not yet been addressed coherently by the French public authorities. Most of the recent efforts have been put on counting out precisely the number of dropouts. There are a large number of solutions and programs addressing this question but they remain scarce, discontinued over time and un-coordinated among actors. In particular, the lack of coordination can be pointed out both in terms of horizontal (intersectoral) and vertical (territorial) coordination. The public intervention at the national level remains segmented among the different ministries and administrations involved in fighting against early school leaving. The French public policies are also segmented between territorial bodies. Promoting anti-dropout and back to school programs supposes a high level of coordination between

national and local public and private organizations. The complex and somehow poorly assumed process of devolution to territorial bodies (decentralization) results in constant competency battles between the French state and these bodies. The matter of early school leaving is one of such battlefields.

If the national framework of dropout policies can be criticized for its inefficiency and lack of strong political initiative, the local actors (street level bureaucrats and case manager) show a different perspective. They appear to be strongly mobilized, easily collaborating and innovative. Directly confronted to the concrete difficulties of dropouts, they appear convinced of the necessity to overwhelm the sectoral/territorial barriers. In that sense, the idea of launching a national fund aiming at subsidizing local programs is an interesting initiative. But the local experiments appear to be too vulnerable to the national/regional institutional context. Besides no framework of policy transfer has been created and the policy evaluation conducted are not taken into consideration as elements of judgment for a possible diffusion of local initiatives. So the local experimentations remain strictly local, totally experimental and limited in time and funding.

The studied experimentations in Rhône-Alpes and Aquitaine show different approaches in order to develop pupil's capabilities. Yet, in spite of their resources, these plans reveal several constraints and the absence of conversion factors indispensable to capability reinforcement. They might suffer from excessive attention paid to a limited number of aspects – most of the time individual ones – like tutoring, self analysis and/ or identification and monitoring).

To promote action plans aiming at a global improvement of the dropouts' capabilities, it seems necessary to work on transversal and integrated policies. Improving youngster's capabilities in order to prevent or cure a massive phenomenon of school dropout (around 150.000 youngsters each year) supposes to take into account numerous factors related to school leaving such as transportation, health, housing, employment, social assistance, employment, substance abuse, etc.

A capability informed policy should then necessarily be integrated and



oriented towards horizontal/vertical coordination for what concerns its governance.

Also, a capability informed policy should pay a great attention to the non take-up processes. In depth studies of the reason why youngsters at risk or already dropped out do not make use of existing resources is central. In order to fully promote capabilities for voice, education and employment, we need to know in details what prevents beneficiaries from using the institutional resources offered to them. Indeed before understanding conversion factors, it might be interesting to focus on the “non-conversion” factors.

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