



# The French “School climate policy”: wellbeing as a collective outcome

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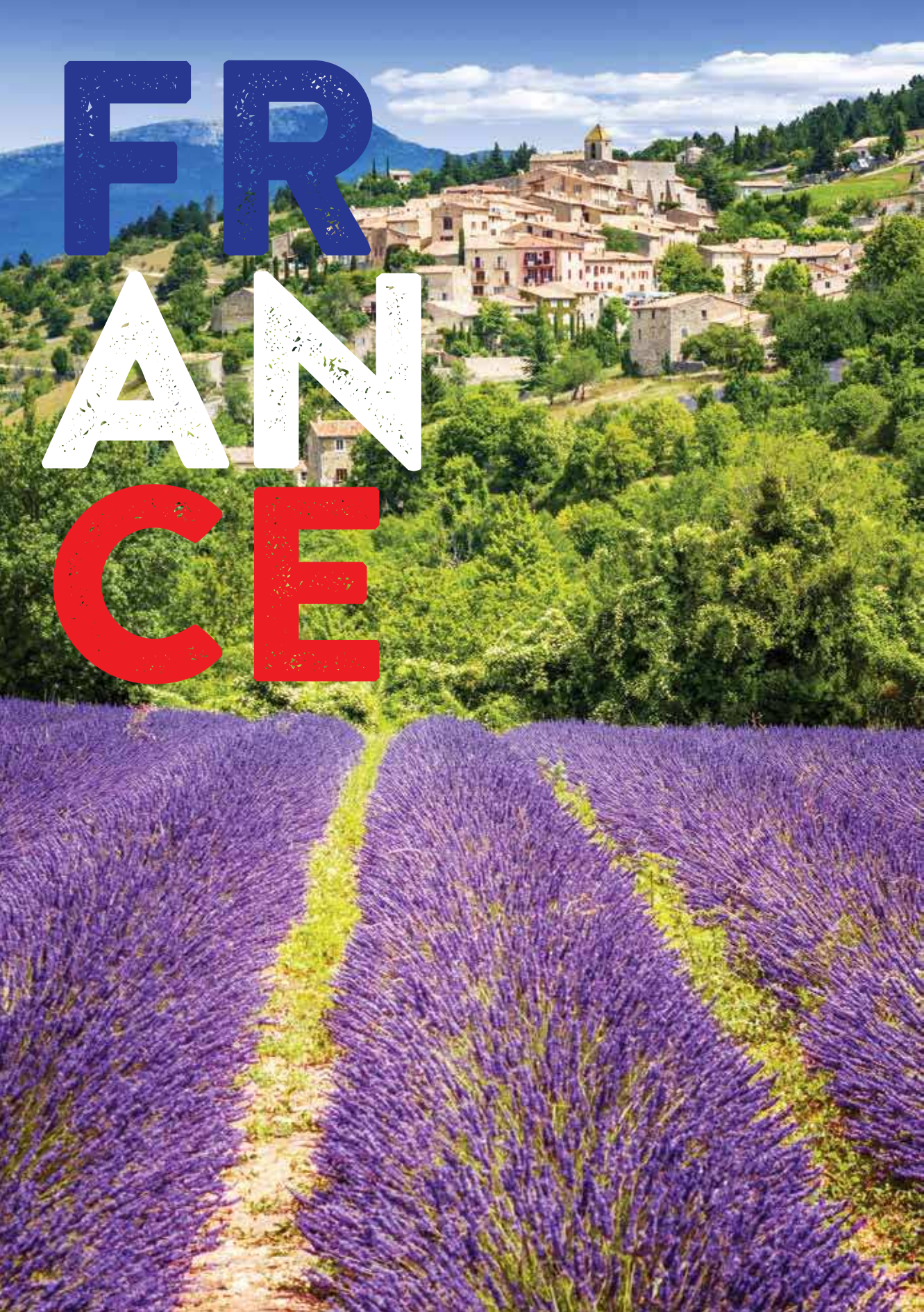
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# ABSTRACT



**Background:** In 2000, the Lisbon Treaty set a common goal to all EU members: “become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010”. Education policy is the primary means to enhance that “human capital”. New research on wellbeing aims at developing the “politics of happiness”, and the *quality of public education* as an important cog in that process. However, wellbeing at school does not yet operate under a coherent and consistent framework. Local differing interpretations or translations remain.

**Aims:** Analysing the French understanding of students’ wellbeing and the rationale for supporting and promoting it in France, taking into account the specificity of national policy.

**Method:** a systematic literature review, a conceptual analysis of educational policy and current research initiatives.

**Results:** Public education in France relies on a strong Republican framework created in 1882. “School climate” policy is consistent with this framework. An essential tension that exists today is the tension between instruction and education. Wellbeing is not seen as the object and aim of instruction (seen as a mark of alternative and private schools), but as a collective outcome. Therefore, most experiments focus on learning environments thanks to new classroom ergonomics and school architecture. Learning skills remains the main goal of these experiments even if there is a notable trend to confuse “school climate” with a convivial atmosphere and person-centred education.

**Key words:** France, Social transition, school climate policy, happiness studies, ergonomics, architecture

# FRANCE: The French “School climate policy”: wellbeing as a collective outcome.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

In the early 1990s, also known as the post- “cold war” period, wellbeing became a political issue in international organisations for comparing nations and some national accounts as Canada or UK (Waldron, 2010). New research on wellbeing aims at developing the “politics of happiness” and the *quality of public education* as an important cog in that process (Bok, 2010) to enhance *human capital*, the capital of the 21<sup>st</sup> century according the Lisbon Treaty. The common goal of the EU is “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010” (Lisbon European Council, 2000).

In the meantime, France was confronted with a major social transition. During the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, the country was transformed by a new policy of modernisation and the impact of globalisation. In short, it was the end of the so called “French exception”. The clinical category of “suffering” had met with great success in the 1990s: it is both a clinical word used in psychoanalytical psychopathology and a political word to describe a “diagnosis of the times”. Thus, the political call to “listen to suffering” became, in the 1990s, a method of local intervention within vulnerable populations (Fassin, 2004). But these political categories quickly vanished from the French political agenda after a moment of success. Nevertheless, it was a way to understand the new face of poverty in post-industrial society from the local and subjective experience. Social studies showed this need, and education was often seen as a *cause* of this so-called French social suffering:

First, Pierre Bourdieu at the Collège de France, in a bestseller collective volume edited in 1993, speaks about “positional suffering” (*misère de position*) as opposed to material poverty (*misère de condition*) (1999)<sup>1</sup>. This concept aims at understanding why the French tend to be so negative when speaking about their life satisfaction, and perceive so much unfairness and despair in their lives. The cause of this negative emotional effect was found in the violent disparity between “academic achievement” (the idea that success in life requires having a degree was a *motto* of the “democratisation of teaching” during the 1980s) and the negative lived experience of having a degree that is neither relevant or adequate to one’s job or of being unemployed and overqualified (Beaud, 2002). “Outcasts of the inside” highlight this hard reality.

This analysis was then reinforced by fieldwork in schools within another sociological tradition. François Dubet (EHESS) developed a sociology of “school experience” focused more accurately on students’ lived experience at each step of the French curriculum (Dubet, 1991; 1996): primary school, middle school, high school (and more recently university). The main goal was to understand how the personality development process (“subjectivation”) depends on the ability to articulate three divergent *logics of actions* within the school universe: integration (to society), strategy (in a market) and subjectivity (developing a personality). For instance, “good students” in high school know perfectly how to balance school life and personal life (Dubet, Martuccelli, 1996: 257).

1 Psychiatrist and anthropologist, Arthur Kleinman (1997) at Harvard University speaks about “social suffering” as well without focusing on education policy.

Although sociological in design, this qualitative approach produces findings (unfortunately only available in French) clearly congruent with the study and definition of “subjective wellbeing” (SWB) covering emotional reactions and cognitive judgments (as feelings of safety and justice) in order to see how French students experiences the quality of their lives. Moreover, the analysis of these skills was studied in a context of a global school mutation and even the dissolution of the “republican school system founded on the rationalistic values of *integration and social cohesion* coming from the Jules Ferry (1832–1893) law of 1882 (when public education became secular, compulsory and free) (Lelièvre, 2000).

Finally, in 2014, when the economist Claudia Senik (Paris School of Economy) reopened the debate on the cultural origins of French “pessimism” (Senik, 2014), she was, unsurprisingly, not really listened to. Written in English and having some echo in international newspapers, her article could be construed as mere “French bashing” and few analysts actually read this quantitative paper as a way to measure and confirm Bourdieu’s and Dubet’s findings of their collective and qualitative inquiry of the 1990s. This misunderstanding comes from the notion of “happiness studies” and the meaning of “happiness” in a country where people feel like they are experiencing a violent social transition. In order to speak of “suffering”, a new language of wellbeing is emerging, coming from the European impulse to reframe most policies: health, work<sup>2</sup>, justice<sup>3</sup> and education<sup>4</sup> as

the paper would show. So, in “The French unhappiness puzzle: The cultural dimension of happiness”, this culture is seen as “mentality” and a set of values coming from school socialisation. As the paper shows, “A set of observations comforts the cultural interpretation of the French idiosyncratic unhappiness: immigrants of the first generation who have been taught in school in France are less happy than those who have not. Similarly, first-generation immigrants who have lived for a long time in France (more than 20 years) are less happy, all else equal, than those who have been there for shorter periods. In turn, French emigrants living abroad are less happy, all else equal, than the average European migrants.” (Senik, 2014, 3–4).

Within this French background, the paper aims to analyse the local understanding of students’ wellbeing and the rationale for supporting and promoting it in France from the specificity of a national policy. In order to answer this issue, a systematic literature review (Ridley, 2012) about “wellbeing at school” was launched at the *French Institute of Education* (Ifé) between 2012 and 2014 in French and English papers. The main finding in French papers was a negative result with the exception of two references: a comparative study between France and Germany focusing on kindergarten (Brougère, 2010) ; a strategic report of the government to precisely develop this new preoccupation (Sauveron, 2013). However, this is an important result: although the word “wellbeing” can be easily integrated into the new political language of contemporary *consensus*, conceptions of wellbeing can radically differ, notably in the world of education.

Conceptual analysis is therefore necessary in order not to confuse very different realities (psychiatric epidemiology and life satisfaction, for instance) under the same keyword or on the contrary differentiate identical issues under different labels (mental health at school before the 1990s, for example and wellbeing at school after the 1990s, school climate and wellbeing). Moreover, the search for (or more accurately: the “quest for”) social indicators require an accurate

2 For the case of the suffering worker (Dejours, 1998, Lézé, 2017) including teachers working for the Department of Education (Lantheaume, Hérou, 2015). ‘Nevertheless, the keyword “psychosocial risks” rapidly replaced the word “suffering”, to speak of “school work” (Romano, 2016)

3 For the case of suicide in prison (Fernandez, Lézé, 2011)

4 Another important fact of the French background: at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, children and adolescents’ violence against themselves (addiction, self-harming, suicide, binge-drinking) or others (assaults and anti-social behaviour became a political mental health issue. Focusing attention on teenage suffering became a virtual cliché (Gansel, Lézé, 2016)

conceptual analysis. So, what is at stake in a political analysis of a policy is assessing whether the change in abstract global political words is really translated into concrete local institutions. Indeed, the desirability of a new political value tells us only one thing: this value has not yet become fact. With these inclusion and exclusion criteria in mind, a new *corpus* was constructed in order to analyse why “wellbeing” was not a word that was actually discussed in education before 2015 in France, but of course *included as a sub-category* in education policy. The main result of this analysis shows that subjective wellbeing is not seen as a political *objective* (a person-centred policy is not yet a consensus) at the heart of an education policy, but as a *secondary positive outcome* of the school climate policy (environment-centred policy). Some educational experiments<sup>5</sup> show however both strands.

From this perspective, in the first part of this article we reconstruct the French understanding of wellbeing, what was *lost* in translation when we used the word “wellbeing” at school and what is *gained* in translation with the current school climate policy: how these policies support and promote “wellbeing” in schools as a secondary positive effect. In the second part of this article we focus on learning environment experiments, in particular classroom ergonomics, and school architecture.

## THE FRENCH UNDERSTANDING OF WELLBEING

### **Lost in translation: a negative connotation of “subjective wellbeing”**

The specificity of French republican education since 1882 is based on a *common morality* for a ‘one and indivisible’ secular republic. Therefore, French schooling is at the heart of the republican

state. *Unity* must prevail over that which divides (Lelièvres, 2000), and the social group must prevail over individuals. How can wellbeing be understood in this political framework? The concept of wellbeing is not self-evident, notably in education and depends on *moral conception* of personhood (Sikes, Nixon, Carr, 2003).

Positive psychology and “subjective wellbeing” concerns “personal growth and development”. Firstly, this utilitarian ethics is individualistic and not consistent with a rationalistic and deontological ethics valourised by the French Republic. Secondly, “local idioms of distress” (Nichter, 2010), but also local idioms of happiness (what is fulfilment in life?) are based on this common morality. Thirdly, the utilitarian ethics is widely seen as a “self-esteem” myth in education (Hewitt, 1998; Famose, Bertsch, 2009) even if these endless discussions turned out to be a reiteration of the causality dilemma known as the “chicken or the egg” problem. Finally, in France, subjective wellbeing seems to be the mark of *alternative and private schools*, more “person-centred” schools where spirituality, creativity and authenticity are opposed to the seriousness and the rationalism of the Republican school. To a large extent, most learning skills (such as “critical thinking”) are systematically pitted against any aspect of subjectivity. One comparative study between France and Germany shows that this Republican school model is observed *very early* on in France, as well as the low importance given to the wellbeing of the child in French nursery schools. The idea is to transform children into *pupils* as quickly as possible (Brougère, 2010).

There is thus an essential tension between two ethics: a moral education based on rationality in which instruction and learning skills for a generation prevail *and* a moral education based on empathy in which “psychosocial skills” and the blossoming and development of individuals prevail over learning skills. This tension could also be seen as a major change in educational focus and priorities in the country, as occurred in the UK, which could become, within the EU, a paradigmatic case: from the student to the *child*,

<sup>5</sup> <http://eduscol.education.fr/experitheque/carte.php>

from the classroom to *personhood*, from cognition to *emotion*, from school routine to educational *utopia*, from pain (and stress) to *pleasure and joy*, from mental health to *subjective wellbeing*, from the value of equality to the value of *happiness* (Ecclestone, Hayes, 2009).

Nevertheless, the *collective and objective conception of wellbeing* is consistent with a rationalistic and deontological ethics centred on collective responsibility and duties. An instance of this consistency is the so-called WHO definition of health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social *wellbeing* and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1946) as in the international *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC) survey, a cross-sectional survey conducted every four years since 1982 under the auspices of the WHO Regional Office for Europe for pupils of 11, 13 and 15 years<sup>6</sup>. French pupils are included since 1994 in the survey. In the French survey of the collective “school experience” (Godeau, Navarro, Arnaud, 2013), consistent with the “school climate policy”, the observation is that there is a marked alteration in the school experience of pupils between leaving primary school and entering college.

### **Republican translation of wellbeing in public education: *school climate policy***

School climate policy is the current model of wellbeing in France. “School climate” is well established with extensive research since the 1980s. and *The National School Climate Center* at Columbia University (New-York, USA) has developed research and tools on the topic since 1996<sup>7</sup>. Studies show the strong link between a confidence-inducing environment, quality of learning and school success (Debarbieux, E. and al, 2012). It is a systemic approach with five dimensions: (i.) collaborative relationships within the school community, (ii.) active teaching and

learning founded on a strong leadership (clear vision of the school project), (iii.) security (the school reacts to harassment and transgressions), (iv.) physical environment, (v.) feeling of belonging to the school community. Quality of life and wellbeing are a collective outcome<sup>8</sup>. The *unit of intervention* is the “learning environment” and this approach is fully consistent with recommendations of the OECD *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA). The main focus of this policy is how learning outcomes are related to learning environments. Wellbeing is only a part of the overall evaluation and is synonymous with *mental health issues* in relation to the possible stress of school environment (competition, for instance).

In France, the local challenge for this policy is *violence at school and thus security*. A national diagnosis was established by the Department of Education in 2010 during a meeting about the security at school (“Etats généraux de la sécurité à l’école”<sup>9</sup>). Since 2013, the new legal framework promotes a new desirable value of care (“benevolence”) in order to rebuild the Republic: “Security and, more specifically, the conditions for a serene school climate, must be established in schools to promote learning, wellbeing, the development of students and good working conditions for all. School-based violence, whose origins are many, requires comprehensive treatment and long-term action, not a purely safe approach that is not sufficiently effective” (Légifrance, 2013). How schools are putting this policy into practice?

Firstly, civic education classes are part of this approach as well as an environment which helps “contain” aggressive and violent behaviours *between students* and encourages learning self-control, conforming to the collective rules and respect for the law. So, the need for a person-

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hbsc.org/about/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.schoolclimate.org>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.reseau-canope.fr/climatscolaire/fileadmin/user\\_upload/doc\\_actus/Approfondissement\\_climat\\_scolaire.pdf](https://www.reseau-canope.fr/climatscolaire/fileadmin/user_upload/doc_actus/Approfondissement_climat_scolaire.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/Rentree\\_2010/48/4/Rentree-2010-0401\\_fiche\\_152484.pdf](http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/Rentree_2010/48/4/Rentree-2010-0401_fiche_152484.pdf)



centred education is often seen as a solution to deviant and anti-conformist behaviours. But if school climate includes discipline (school rules and regulations), it is mostly to be a tool to *prevent* violence between students (peer victimisation and harassment). In fact, the first victims of this violence are the students in class. It is therefore a question of creating a climate of security and confidence. In this framework, benevolence (or care) mean absence of *humiliation* at school (Lapeyronnie, 2014: 26), including in the relationship between teacher and student<sup>10</sup>.

Secondly, School climate policy have a new management tool since 2010: national surveys in 2011, 2013 (middle school) and 2015 (high school)<sup>11</sup>. But this national policy must be the policy of each educational institution as well. The motto is “A framework to be respected, thus a protective framework”. Easy access to a collaborative website<sup>12</sup> was developed to provide concrete help with local dissemination, using a qualitative tool for a diagnosis of school climate<sup>13</sup>. This tool is pragmatic and adapted to the daily reality of the institutions. Therefore, it aims to assess 7 factors which could have a positive or negative impact on school climate, as well as the whole organisation of the educational establishment: team strategy, co-operative pedagogy, school justice, prevention of violence and harassment, co-education (involving the families of students), partnership practices outside of school with, for instance, associations, cultural institutions, and quality of life at school (time and space organisation). These local diagnoses were in fact more relevant than the national surveys, and generally efficient to prevent violence. So,

wellbeing is seen as a political and collective ideal of social cohesion between these dimensions. But institutions are then torn by their dual mission of “protecting” students against the world and “preparing” them for the world of tomorrow.

Thirdly, schools are putting this policy into practice in changing the *learning environments* including design, ergonomics and architecture.

## LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AS CASE STUDIES

In a database of 5943 initiatives in education throughout France, only 257 items with “wellbeing” at school projects<sup>14</sup> can be counted: 25 items promote Sophrology, 22 items promote yoga, 44 items promote Freinet’s active and collaborative pedagogy and 127 items promote “benevolence” at school. These items show several effective examples of wellbeing conceptions at school and give evidence of the two definitions of wellbeing: collective and objective; individualistic and subjective. For instance, two experiments use the *Situation, Perception, Auto-pilot, Reaction* and *Knowledge* (SPARK) resilience program designed by the positive psychologist Ilona Boniwell (Boniwell, Ayers, 2013). One is a private middle school and the other a state-funded middle school in a priority education network<sup>15</sup>. A private elementary school (the *lab school*) was also launched recently in Paris and designed by the psychologist Pascale Haag, assistant Professor at the EHESS, Paris.

These experiments are scattered and very localised. In the idea of “climate school”, it is possible to find a very strong feature of the French Republican school history. School is a collective space and architecture (Derouet-Besson, 1998). Two experiments seem therefore more

<sup>10</sup> [http://cache.media.eduscol.education.fr/file/Actu\\_2014/43/5/2014\\_ecole\\_bienveillante\\_bdef\\_315435.pdf](http://cache.media.eduscol.education.fr/file/Actu_2014/43/5/2014_ecole_bienveillante_bdef_315435.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.reseau-canope.fr/climatscolaire/diagnostiquer/connaitre-les-resultats-des-enquetes-nationales/les-dernieres-enquetes-de-climat-scolaire.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.reseau-canope.fr/climatscolaire/accueil.html>

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.reseau-canope.fr/climatscolaire/fileadmin/user\\_upload/outilspdf/OUTIL\\_D\\_AUTODIAGNOSTIC\\_1er\\_degr%C3%A9.pdf](https://www.reseau-canope.fr/climatscolaire/fileadmin/user_upload/outilspdf/OUTIL_D_AUTODIAGNOSTIC_1er_degr%C3%A9.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <http://eduscol.education.fr/experitheque/carte.php>

<sup>15</sup> <http://eduscol.education.fr/experitheque/consultFicheIndex.php?idFiche=12268>

representative of this way to conceive education and the learning environment.

### The 'Ideal classroom': design and ergonomics

Architecture is the material translation of political and moral values. Thus, the Republican school has to rethink its values according to a new material translation of the learning environment. Indeed, classrooms have not evolved since the 1980s, not to say since the nineteenth century in the orientation of the room towards the blackboard (today White). On May 27, 2014, the Department of Education launched the contest "Prix Jean Prouvé, the school furniture of tomorrow" during an important Colloquium at L'École Boulle in Paris: "Refounding school: a question for design". The objective of the prize is explicitly to develop a new approach "focused on the comfort and well-being of pupils in a changing school". This competition had two parts: one is prospective with schools of design, the other is industrial with professional designers (with one winner for each of the three categories, elementary school, middle school and high school). On February 4, 2015, four prizewinners were awarded in the "Industrial Designers" category: Unqui Designers, Prism Design Studio, Pierre Abello Design and Pierre-Louis Gerlier Design. But a single innovation has gathered sufficient orders and offers of industrialization for a decision to go into production from September 2017: SOFY, Pierre Abello Design, for High school.



The first experiment was developed one year before this event, a mere "brain-storming", brings together designers and ergonomists in order to design the "ideal classroom" for elementary schools only. Classroom organisation is a very strong feature of the republican and rationalist ideal of French teaching: a teacher with authority has to speak in front of a group of pupils aligned in a row, docile and silent. Today, what is the best learning environment for pupils? How can modularity of space be tackled? How can furniture be adapted to contemporary pedagogy in schools? What is the place for media, outside or in the centre of the room? Two *works in progress*, in Marseille since 2013<sup>16</sup> and in Paris since 2017, show how collective wellbeing largely depends on the quality of the layout of interior architecture and materials used for the classroom.

### An innovative architecture for translating benevolence

The case of the Niki-de Saint-Phalle nursery and primary school in Saint-Denis by Paul Le Quernec architect, a priority education zone, is a very good example of this trend in school architecture<sup>17</sup>, perhaps even a paradigmatic one. The architecture aims at translating the value of a "caring and safe school" and creating a peaceful atmosphere that promotes student learning. "I imagined a place where children feel better than at home, built with simple materials, and whose shapes produce well-being" (Zappi, 2016). The architectural concept was based on the human brain and its two hemispheres. Curved lines are used as well as natural materials. The colour of the building changes according to the perspectives of the pupils. The classroom furniture is handmade and curved as well. Outdoor natural light creates a warm atmosphere

16 [https://www.academia.edu/3647582/De\\_l\\_id%C3%A9al\\_du\\_bonheur\\_%C3%A0\\_la\\_norme\\_scolaire](https://www.academia.edu/3647582/De_l_id%C3%A9al_du_bonheur_%C3%A0_la_norme_scolaire)

17 <http://www.paul-le-quernec.fr/projets/projetannee.php?pageld=43&sortBy=annee> / <http://ville-saint-denis.fr/tv/un-nouveau-groupe-scolaire-%C3%A0-saint-denis-niky-de-saint-phalle>



holding pupils and teachers.. The transparency between the inside and the outside contribute to the ease of an intuitive orientation: “Every choice made on this project takes into consideration the impact architectural design can have on children’s psycho-motor development”<sup>18</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Wellbeing at school seems a positive and easy idea around which to build a political consensus in education. But results show in France an essential tension not only between conceptions of ethics of wellbeing, but also between two conceptual models of wellbeing. Happiness studies works for unification, but there is no standard for promoting wellbeing at school yet.

The first model is an *objectivist model*. Wellbeing is an effect of social institution. The school team stands for social institution as well as school architecture. The unit of intervention is clearly the

learning environment. The goal of the school is primarily to train learning skills and to reduce social inequality.

The second and opposite is a *subjectivist model*. The unit of intervention is to change individuals and socialise with “emotional wellbeing” (self-esteem, responsibility, emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience and stress management, etc.). This model actually promotes a new school goal: equipping people to lead a “fulfilling life”. But can a fulfilling life be led without the landmark of succeeding at exams?

These two ideals could be seen reciprocally as mere ideology. The French civil society (here, the family) has a strong claim to education (as opposed to instruction, done in schools) and the French state could be, as in the UK, tempted to abandon the idea of equality at school and educational achievement in the name of happiness at school. But an educational policy must not throw out learning outcomes in favour of a convivial atmosphere. Because a “knowledge economy”, today or in the future, is certainly not a peaceful and unworldly world.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.designboom.com/architecture/paul-quernec-school-saint-denis-09-24-2015/>

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