LEAVING SCHOOL, A NEW FORM OF JUVENILE DEVIANCE?

Definitions

Several terms are generally used when discussing school-leaving. It is important to define them.

The term *décrocheur* in French designates students who gradually drop out of the school system. Originally applied to high school students, it has now been extended downward to junior high school (*collège*). It contrasts with resigning" (*démission*), designating the student's decision to leave, and exclusion (*exclusion*), resulting from a decision by the school authorities.

Déscolarisation, a broader term, is useful in that it covers a number of hypotheses as to the processes by which youths under age 16 find themselves outside of the school system. These include exclusion with no continuation in another establishment, gradual dropping out in the form of frequent, increasing truancy, and "accidents" in the youth's personal history (death of a parent or other). To translate this term, we shall generally stick to *dropping out*.

Whereas dropouts over age 16 are not breaking the law on compulsory schooling, younger school-leavers are shirking (or compelled to shirk) that obligation. They are no longer doing their "job as students" and are in the category of "children presumed to be school-dodgers" (Code of Education, article L. 131-8).

The very wording of the official instructions clearly indicates that failure to attend school regularly (lack of assiduity at school) represents a breach of compulsory schooling: "It is important, firstly that students be required to respect the obligation of assiduity"[1].

Although the question of truancy and dropping out is as old as public schools themselves, it is now viewed as a major social problem and tends to be formulated increasingly in the terms of the debate on security and fear of crime.

With secondary education now extended to the masses, the goal being to have 80% of each generation reach the high school diploma (*baccalauréat*) level and all students at least a BEP or CAP[2] level (according to the 1989 guidelines), dropping out before age 16 becomes all the more visible. The truth is that the consequences of dropping out are more serious today than they were when there was practically full employment and many youths left school without any diploma but had no difficulty in finding a job. To be employed nowadays, a relatively high qualification is required, and the social and vocational prospects of students who quit school without a diploma and/or before age 16 are quite poor.

Moreover, dropping out is viewed as all but a problem of law and order, if not to say of public safety : what becomes of youngsters who are not in school, and therefore not under control? Are they at risk of becoming delinquents, or exposed to dealings of all sorts, as they roam the streets, unprotected? Are their parents accomplices, and therefore liable to sanctions for allowing their children to lack assiduity or drop out of school? The dropping out scene is transferred, then, from schools to the (deprived) neighbourhood, with truant or dropout youths labelled as belonging to those "dangerous classes" requiring closer control.

In the 1980s, the theme of academic failure was replaced by dropping out which is at the intersection of three assumptions, closely entangled in the public debate : growing fear of crime and insecurity, increasing and increasingly young juvenile delinquency, and the extension of "violence" of all sorts. In public debate and in institutional discourse, attention then focused on the psycho-social characteristics of young dropouts, so as to identify one or several typical profiles, with emphasis on "deliberate" exits and on the student's individual responsibility for the process, which raises the question of "maladjustment" to school.

Hazardous figures

The figures on truancy and school-leaving before age 16 are extremely imperfect and vague. The official definition of truancy is "when the child was not in class without any legitimate reason or valid excuse for at least four half-days in the course of a month"[3], but the latest rules (March 2003) call for a follow-up procedure at the first unjustified absence. This follow-up is to be done by the school at first, with referral of the case to the school inspectorate (*inspection académique*) if absence is repeated. The latter may forward the case to the children's court judge or set up a "parenting program". If no improvement is noted the case is transmitted to the public prosecutor's office and the parents may be summoned to appear before a lower court.

Previous Criminal Code dispositions (prosecution for deficient child-rearing) continue to apply.

Findings are disparate and differ depending on whether the sources are official or provided by research[4]. Percentages for truancy range from 1 to 7.5% of students, using the criterion of 4 half-days per month.

There are no reliable figures for permanent school-leaving, the complexity of the problem residing, additionally, in the fact that some youths may cease to attend school at one point and go back a few months or years later. There is no quantitative indication of an increase in the phenomenon between the Tallon report[5] and the latest national figures available. The assertion found in the October 25, 1996 instructions ("schools are faced with a real, preoccupying increment in this occurrence") seems to correspond to increased concern with truancy, then, rather than to any objective assessment of an increase thereof.

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[1] Official instruction n° 96-247 dated October 25, 1996.
[2] These are first-level vocational diplomas passed before the end of high school.

[3] Article L. 131-8 of the Code of Education.
[4] ESTERLE-HEDIBEL M., 2003, *Les arrêts de scolarité avant 16 ans. Étude des processus,* Roubaix-Douai, Ville de Roubaix-FASILD Nord-Pas-de-Calais / IUFM Nord-Pas-de-Calais, 13-15.
[5] TALLON G., 1979, *La violence dans les collèges,* Paris, Inspection Générale à la Vie Scolaire.

Leaving school in Roubaix

To define the object of my study in Roubaix, I looked at the situation of youths who ceased to attend school before the end of junior high school: those students, normally registered with a school, had no longer been present at all for a period ranging from three months to two years at the time of my investigation. Their situation was known to the school officials and to social workers : they have not been "lost to sight", but are duly identified by the institutions and there have been occasional, unsuccessful attempts to bring them back to junior high school.

Although they are only a handful (4 or 5 for about 550 students in an establishment), their situation may represent the ultimate end of a process that was stopped in other cases. The study of situations focused on 3 schools, all part of a *réseau d'éducation prioritaire*[6] (as are 6 of the city's 7 public junior high schools). Fourteen situations were observed, with anonymity guaranteed for the individuals and schools involved.

I met with the youths, some members of their family (usually their parents) and anyone who would have been in contact with them in this respect, both in their schools and outside. I crossed the findings from interviews and observations with those from their school records and with other documents relevant to the study. This provided as accurate a description of their itinerary as possible.

This research does not pretend to be representative. If any generalization is possible, it is more on processes and relationships than on individuals or groups. School-leaving processes are multi-factorial. Each may in fact be viewed as a unique "story" in which social parameters and personal features interact. I was also interested in the way the different protagonists viewed the unfolding of this process, in that these representations shed light on the various logics behind their action.

Out-of-school youths are designated as deviants by the school institution. The present study takes an interactionist stance in which "Deviance is not a quality that lies in behavior itself, but in the interaction between the person who commits an act and those who responds to it"[7].

Common features of dropping out situations

On the whole, junior high school teachers rarely consult the students' school records, even when a serious problem arises early in secondary school, in spite of the fact that these contain information, sometimes including warnings, about the children's difficulties in elementary school.

Some teachers are in possession of precise details that may help them understand the child's situation, but these are not used collectively to find a solution to the educational problem. Students are dealt with just about uniformly.

The young school-leavers whose itineraries I studied all experienced periods of truancy, most were "disturbers" of order in their school. They did not receive any particular support nor were they regarded benevolently at any point in their school career, even if an occasional teacher may have wondered why they were absent or attempted to help them, and in spite of the sometimes spectacular incidents in which some of these adolescents participated actively. Rarely did they receive proposals of any sort of relay arrangement or supportive action coordinated with the regular school work, and they were "dramatically alone", as Broccolicchi points out[8].

Furthermore, some educational guidance decisions are not put into effect. The lack of coordination between schools or

within a given establishment, parental reticence and even refusal, misunderstandings or lack of explanations given to families may pave the way to school leaving, with the most helpless parents oscillating between purely and simply refusing a particular schooling option and leaving their child totally in the hands of the school system. Most parents of dropout youths are extremely vulnerable, socially, live on welfare and have no personal experience of successful schooling. They have little or inadequate knowledge of the school system and do not know where to turn when their child leaves school. In fact, those with better resources (employment, higher education, interpersonal networks) were able to find solutions to their children's difficulties, in terms of educational guidance, without having to resort to social workers. Factors endogenous to school combine with situations in which the family cannot give the child support in his school work, and is unable to counteract the negative image he receives of himself, for several reasons:
- conflicts within the family, in a context of precariousness, made more acute by the youth's critical situation at school, prevent it from fully playing its educational role,
- the youth rejects school so violently that parental influence cannot bring him back,
- the family can more or less put up with having one or several of its children out of school.

In addition, when school achievements are poor or have been going downhill for several years the chances of setting up any vocational or educational project through schooling are very slim. A neighbourhood peer group may be an attraction or provide compensation for the idleness associated with being a dropout. This was true for five of these youths, who began to commit some offences and to hang out with a gang as the drop-out process became more pronounced. Once they had ceased attending school, their delinquency continued and was even amplified, although a causal relationship is impossible to contend.

As a rule, situations of dropouts are characterized by the multiplicity of actors who rarely coordinate their efforts, may not even be acquainted with each other and possibly work at cross-purposes, with such aims as returning the student to school, or work around the family, or look for a job, a pre-qualifying training course, etc. Each ascribes the difficulties encountered by the youth or caused by him to a different reason, always outside of their own action.

Thus, the various factors contributing to the dropping out process coalesce.

School them all?

According to our observations during this study, "false promotions" to the next grade, with the phrase "repeating the year unnecessary" are misleading, presenting students with a contradictory injunction: they are to remain in the establishment with the awareness that they cannot expect to improve their achievements. The situation is even more paradoxical in the case of truancy, when the case is notified to the higher echelon and parents are enjoined to comply with the law on compulsory education until age 16.

These fictitious promotions go along with ambivalent statements by teachers : they harbour regrets, mixed with feelings of powerlessness at neglecting these students without offering them any real educational opportunities, they criticize the "same *collège* for all" policy .

This policy dates back to the mid 1980s, when students ceased to be oriented toward short curricula at the end of their second year in junior high school. The proclaimed goal at the time was "success for everyone" through skill-enhancing training, and learning-impaired students remained in the junior high

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[6] Educational priority network, a scheme set up for public schools catering to particularly disadvantaged children.
[7] BECKER H.S., 1963, *Outsiders*, New-York, The Free Press of Glencoe, 14.
[8] BROCCOLICCHI S., 2000, Désagrégation des liens pédagogiques et situations de rupture, *Ville École Intégration*, 122, 43.

schools, while no sufficiently structured second chance schemes were set up to make their stay profitable, and no change in initial training allowed their teachers to acquire the skills appropriate to this new mass schooling and to the growing array of achievement levels throughout junior high school. "Academic failure" then developed among these students, with some of them regarded are practically hopeless. This led teachers to "sort out" the "salvageable" students from the others, with particularly negative judgments about "disturbers" or "lazy" elements. Repeating one's year came to be almost a matter of merit, or at the least, was based on the bet that the child might improve, as well as on the consideration of the teacher's ability to "tolerate" the student for another year.

This results is a system where the patent difficulties of some students are not solved, and which leads them to leave school as a way of withdrawing from a dead end situation. This withdrawal may be silent or much more spectacular, and in the latter case is frequently attended by definitive exclusion pronounced by the school disciplinary board.

Handling deviant students

The effects of academic failure and of feelings of unfairness on undisciplined behaviour in junior high school have been documented in many studies. My own methodological option provides very accurate, detailed observations of this. In situations involving disorderly students in general, actors in the school system focus their attention on the disturbances much more than on learning difficulties, viewed as mere consequences of unruliness, whereas the learning problems actually were present since elementary school in several cases and were evident when they entered junior high school. "Not doing work", leading to poor marks, was seen then as a form of unruliness, the different expressions of which were alleged to be the direct cause of those pitiful achievements.

Punishment and sanctions for indiscipline and for "not doing work" show in incident reports at school. Some sanctions are not legal (doing copy work, collective punishment, asking the student to write a "job application" letter before resuming any educational relationship with him). Often they are unfeasible, barely explained to students and may generate strong feelings of unfairness.

The treatment applied to disorderly students who ultimately left school, in the cases encountered in this study, was definitely of a classical coercive sort ever since they entered junior high school (with exclusions, admonitions, hearings before disciplinary boards), aimed at making them learn, willy-nilly, their "job as students", or "how to behave like a reasonable student", it being understood that if they do not, it is because they do not want to. Other measures or schemes conceived as more educational have been set up, such as promises or oaths, monitoring notebooks, committees or councils on school life, but all are based on the same type of injunction or sanction, and have not resulted in any improvement of the kind looked for. In fact, neither the students at whom they were directed nor their parents every mentioned, in our talks, having derived any benefit whatsoever in terms of understanding or education from all those punishments, which some viewed as indications of a complete lack of comprehension of their situation.

Students who had been truants but not disorderly were not sanctioned for that, except by admonitions on their grade reports, which attempted, increasingly insistently, to convince them to attend school. Only when the institutional actors perceived some *intention* on the part of the student, such as when he ceased to have an excuse for his absences, was his behaviour viewed as deviant. The youth and his family were then suspected of "ill will", that is of a deliberate opposition to the school institution, whereas that lack of justification might simply be an indication of the student's greater vulnerability and of the need for more educational support.

The dropping out process brought to light practices stemming from developments in the school system itself, conditioning the actors and leaving them with little latitude to react differently. However, some rather exceptional attitudes are encountered in individual teachers, such as putting one youth, then 14 and repeating his second year of junior high school, "in the corner". The youth, who felt this punishment to be humiliating, refused, and a quarrel with the teacher ensued. His reaction, interpreted as representing a potential threat of physical violence aimed at the personnel in general, caused him to be excluded definitively, and assigned to a school that was far from his home and which he never attended.

The distinction operated by Woods between "deviance-provocative" teachers with very negative judgments and aggressive attitudes toward students, and "deviance-insulative" teachers with the opposite judgments and attitudes, is fully relevant in this context[9].

Educate or exclude?

Often dropout students had been labelled disorderly and "uneducable" for months or even for several years before they actually left school. Such judgments are *self-fulfilling prophecies* as to both the impossibility of educating the child and his educational and social destiny. Labelling theories are fully meaningful, then, when applied to schools: "imposed norms, designation of deviants, reinforcement of deviance, stigmatisation of those having committed the most serious offences, and last, crystallization of a deviant identity"[10].

The measures proposed often transfer attempts to change the student's behaviour to structures or individuals peripheral or external to the teaching situation: contacts with crime prevention street workers, monitoring by the school social worker, etc.

Since the only cause of and remedy for the student's failure is, allegedly, his personal responsibility, the situation would be righted if only he would "get to study". This avoids any reference to defective learning, and protects the critical point of teachers' skills; that is, educational interaction in the classroom. Whereas many studies clearly show the impact of teachers' practices on their students' achievements, these practices were never questioned in the situations investigated here.

The student with problems becomes a "problem" person, and all of the school actors agree to handle the situation through injunctions and sanctions rather than by solutions that would enable the youth to continue his studies. The management of "deviants students" thus tends to be conceived and acted on in terms of order-maintenance in the school and of punishment of disobedience, in terms of both attendance and behaviour, with bad grades virtually counted as rule breaking.

A subsequent study in the same city uncovered some schemes, either broad-based or developing individualized projects (relay schemes), designed to prevent dropping out. Most of these were set up at a national level to combat "violence" at school and in neighbourhoods. Students identified as "disturbing the school order" do benefit from them, but to a lesser extent, particularly if their parents do not participate in the proposed second chance educational schemes. different institutional attitudes could be observed in these latter initiatives: deviant students are stigmatised less, the educability of every student is asserted and individual solutions are sought, with the help of

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[9] WOODS P., 1984, A sociological analysis of disruptive incidents, *in* FRUDE N., GAULT H., (eds.), *Disruptive Behaviour in Schools*, New York, John Wiley and Sons, 117-135, esp. 119.

[10] VAN ZANTEN A., 2001, *L'école de la périphérie*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 305.

partners outside the school (special education, or integration-promoting agencies, for instance). In these instances, emphasis is placed less on the relationship to the law or the norm and more on the person as a whole, viewed as a "child" or an "adolescent" as much as a "student". This shows that some educational approaches are being developed on the outskirts of the school system, and although their presence and effects do not affect the mechanisms of selection and exclusion, they may, in some cases, offer alternatives for some students in great difficulty within the conventional school system. These approaches, which exist in other regions, coexist, nationally speaking, with a strong tendency to criminalize youthful be-haviour in schools and with the increased intervention of the police and justice system in school life[11].

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[11] ESTERLE-HEDIBEL M., 2002, La pénalisation des mineurs à l'école, *Claris, Le Bulletin,* 3 (downloadable from the web site: *http://www.groupeclaris.com/*).