



# Families enacting ‘alternative’ schooling choices and the State: A power relationship

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## Families enacting 'alternative' schooling choices and the State: A power relationship

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### Abstract

In recent years, French parents have increasingly chosen to homeschool their children or to send them to 'alternative' independent schools. French President Emmanuel Macron, in reaction to this trend, announced on October 2, 2020, his desire to restrict homeschooling to instances when 'health imperatives' necessitate this option and, further, to reinforce state control of independent schools. A bill to this effect passed on July 23, 2021, survived a challenge before the Constitutional Court, and became the law of the land one month later on August 24, 2021.

The research for this paper was completed before the law took effect. Its aim was to understand the relationship between the State and those families who have made alternate schooling choices; that is, to explore the potential effects of implementing the new school policy. I relied on governmental data and, to capture how school policies were perceived by families, data collected in France that included interviews with parents, answers to an online survey, and one interview with a civil servant at the Ministry of National Education. The results of the research reveal that the dynamics that operate between 'independent schooling' families and the State have the markings of a power relationship that pits State authority against parents who tend to have low confidence in public schools and may identify with a counterculture. Finally, this recent legislation suggests that the French education system is moving from an educational model of 'inclusion through control' for children learning outside of public schools (Farges et al., 2018) to a model of exclusion through coercion.

**Keywords:** schooling choices; parenting; alternatives; compulsory education; public policy; social control

## 1 Introduction

Ever since the passing of the Jules Ferry Law on March 28, 1882, French parents have been obligated to educate their children, either by providing instruction at home or by enrolling them in a school. Until recently, public or private schooling was the norm, but a growing movement has been underway for some decades for 'independent' options – either home-

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schooling or instruction in 'alternative schools'. *Homeschooling* refers to the situation of children who are educated within the family by their parents. By *alternative schools* we mean secular schools not funded by the State, which exercise considerable freedom in the definition of their curricula. For this reason, we call them 'independent'. It should be noted that in the literature the term 'alternative' refers to a category of recent establishments distinct from both traditionalist schools with strong religious ties (which would be chosen for ideological reasons) and schools that use traditional pedagogy (Poucet, 2002). However, as my field research shows, the distinction between ideological and pedagogical is often blurred, as these sources of motivation may overlap in parents' decision-making.

Recently, this movement for parental control of children's education in contrast to State control became an issue on the public agenda. On October 2, 2020, Emmanuel Macron declared his support for a bill designed to counter separatism<sup>1</sup> that would restrict homeschooling to cases of 'health imperatives' and tighten control on independent schools. The writing of the text was entrusted to a special committee appointed on December 16, 2020. The bill, Article 21, was presented to the Council of Ministers and registered with the Presidency of the National Assembly on December 9 and, after surviving a Constitutional challenge, passed into law on August 24, 2021 as the Law of August 24, 2021, reinforcing the respect of the principles of the Republic. We do recognize that it is necessary to question the effects of the privatized forms of education that the bill discourages, along with their relationship with public education, their varying degrees of integration into the global educational project, and the alternative visions of education they present. These options lead to increasing freedom of choice for parents while at the same time challenging the ideal of equality.

However, the primary goal of the August 24 legislation is to restrict alternate forms of education that are equated with school avoidance due to radicalization, an association not based on quantitative data. The implementation of this bill on August 24, 2021 thus marks the end of the purely declarative<sup>2</sup> regime to which parents were previously subject, and puts in its place a regime that requires parents to request conditional authorization for alternative schooling choices (Article 21). In effect, it replaces the previous obligation that parents provide *instruction* with the obligation that they send their children, most often, to specific government-sanctioned schools. This article scrutinizes the extent to which the relationships between the State and these families can be seen as power relationships. My research is not rooted in a sociology of public action (such as would read privatization as a political measure) or in market sociology (viewing privatization as a commercial activity) but looks instead at how these choices emerge in the context of the family and become anchored in individual lives. The paper aims to highlight the impact of public policies on families' choices and practices. Before exploring this question, we describe the French education system and the place of these schooling options in public thinking.

<sup>1</sup> The bill was renamed the 'bill to strengthen secularism and reinforce republican principles'. It mainly aims to fight against 'radical Islamism' or 'political Islam'. It concerns the following points: the neutrality of public services, associations, a fight about schooling or the return to the principles of the 1905 law on religious associations.

<sup>2</sup> Before this bill went into effect, parents who decided to homeschool needed only to inform their mayor and the chief education officer (the director of the Ministry of Education's departmental services) of their decision by mail at the beginning of each school year.

## 2 Background: The French educational system

The history of French schools is strongly marked by the republican project's aim of separating school spaces from non-school spaces. This boundary, which is reflected in the concept of 'school form',<sup>3</sup> is both material and symbolic (Pachod, 2019). The French public school is mixed and secular, a sort of a secular republican sanctuary. The system further advocates the separation of the school from the family. As a result, education in France is highly centralized. While other countries, such as Canada and the United States, are more accommodating of schooling options such as homeschooling and schools outside the public school system, and have in many cases developed partnerships between public schools and the alternatives (Gerst, 2007), the French state remains largely committed to a uniform vision.

Since September 2019, French education has been compulsory for children residing in France between the ages of three and sixteen. The law entitled 'School of Trust' that established this requirement was passed in July of 2019. While most schools are state-run (*écoles publiques*), there are also private schools under contract (*sous-contrat*)<sup>4</sup> to the French government, in which case the government pays the teachers' salaries, the school follows the national curriculum, and fees are reasonably low. This type of school, formerly known as the 'free school', was created at the time of the secularisation of schools by Jules Ferry (at the end of the nineteenth century). There are also private schools (*écoles privées*) that are fully independent (*hors contrat*) of the State. They do not receive any financial support from the State, and though they are in some respects regulated, they have latitude to define their own curricula provided that a common core of knowledge and skills is included. As can be seen in Figure 1, these schools are mainly secular, but when they are religious, they are mainly Catholic (15.8 per cent) or Islamic (8.8 per cent).

The history of French schools is linked to the history of secularism and its conflict with the Catholic Church, which at first perceived the public school as a competing institution. The animosity ran in both directions. According to Jean Jaurès (1904), the president of the French Socialist Party, 'Catholic logic' is incompatible with the Republic, which is founded on freedom of conscience. He therefore considered it essential to firmly shut the doors of the educational establishment to the Church. In the mid-twentieth century, Catholic schools began, however, to request financial support from the government. The 1959 Debré law attempted to resolve the quarrel by agreeing to help private schools financially, on condition that they enter into a contract with the state and accept a degree of state regulation (Poucet, 2002). We should perhaps mention that Christian education is no longer a primary objective of these private institutions, nor is it the dominant reason why families choose a denominational school (Ballion, 1980). More recently, however, French schools have had to deal with new concerns arising from immigration in general, and in particular from the evolving view that Islam poses a special problem for schools (Bozec, 2020). To name but one of numerous controversies, there was the issue of whether Muslim mothers of students should wear the veil when accompanying school trips.<sup>5</sup> Secularism is redefined as a norm of religious neutrality and in-

<sup>3</sup> This concept was invented by Guy Vincent (1994) to describe how education has been organized in our societies since the seventeenth century. It implies, in particular, specific space and time dedicated to education and training, impersonal rules and the rationalization of learning through a curriculum with distinct content areas.

<sup>4</sup> In the article I will use the term 'private' schools to refer to those private schools that have a contract with the State.

<sup>5</sup> See, e. g., French government resists calls for school trip headscarf ban. *The Guardian*, October 16, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/16/french-government-resists-calls-to-ban-headscarfs-on-school-trips>

visibility that no longer applies only to government employees but also to students and their parents. In France in 2018, 86 per cent of French primary-school pupils and 78.8 per cent of secondary-school students were registered in public schools. As we have noted, most French students have long followed a national curriculum defined by the Ministry of Education, but in May of 2015 the French government published reforms that gave both public and private schools the leeway to define 20 per cent of their curricula independently. In certain cases, parents could opt for an 'alternative' independent school<sup>6</sup> instead of public or private schooling. In the years before the August 24 law went into effect, the choice to enrol children in independent schools was growing in popularity. Independent schools were not bound by government contracts and therefore received no funding from the state. They enjoyed pedagogical freedom in the construction of their curricula. The number of children enrolled in these independent schools (at the primary level) increased by 222 percent between 2010 and 2019 (Ministry of National Education and Youth, 2020); a figure that nevertheless remained marginal in relation to the total number of children enrolled in France (growing from 0.23 per cent in 2010 to 0.75 per cent in 2019). The number of homeschooled children also increased by 94 percent in 2018–2019 compared to 2014–2015, according to recent figures from a government impact study conducted in the context of the bill of August 24 (Légifrance, 2020). In the United States, homeschooling is fairly common and a much older practice – it gained popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s – and was largely motivated by parents' religious values (Van Galen, 1991; Mayberry, 1995). This phenomenon is often seen as a form of privatization of education (Verger et al. 2016), and has been observed by scholars in both rich and less affluent countries, though in different proportions.

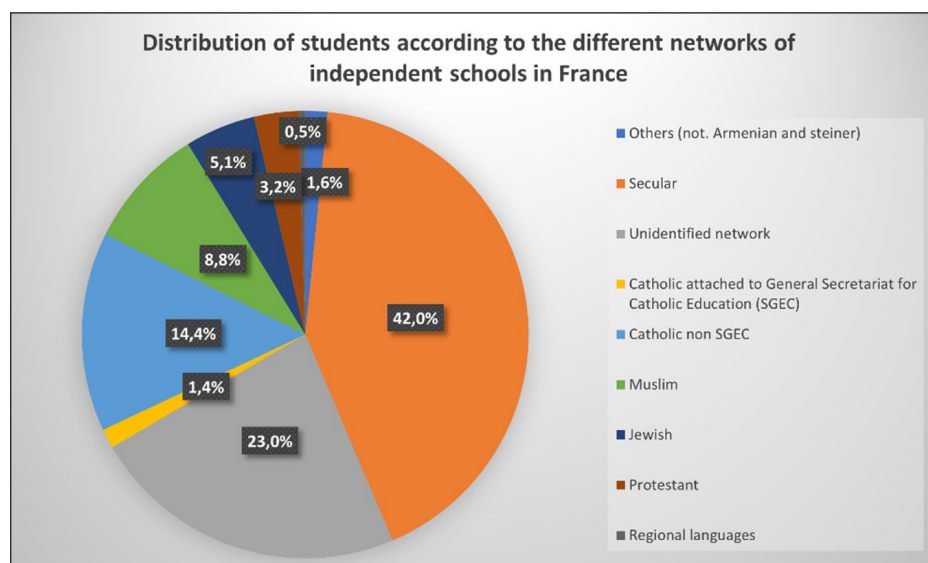


Figure 1

Source: Figure translated into English, originally written in French, from the Ministry of National Education. Report N°277 by Mrs. Annick BILLON, made on behalf of the Committee on Culture, Education and Communication, filed on February 7, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> In the article, I will use the term 'independent schooling' families to describe the families who opt for these options.

Three sets of causes explain the emergence and spread of 'alternative' schooling choices and parents' growing trust in them as a legitimate resource that would better serve their families than traditional by regular schools. First, since the 1960s and the rise of mass education, discontent with traditional schools has emerged. Critics came to see the latter as excessively bureaucratic and impersonal. Public schools came to be associated with poor academic performance,<sup>7</sup> and some parents felt side-lined by the State, as though they were no longer allowed a voice in their child's education. This family-school conflict was identified by Ballion (1982) as a factor driving the popularity of the private school choice; some parents simply could not accept the role of mere 'educational assistants' whose only function was to support the school's inflexible agenda. A logic of 'exit' (Hirschman, 1970) then developed which, in France, coincided with the changes in private education imposed by the State when, under the terms of the Debré law, private schools yielded up some of their independence in exchange for State funding. Another wave of discontent followed as people became unsatisfied with Catholic private education, and sometimes with 'alternative' private education as well. Private schools allowed parents greater investment in school management and were better able to individualize children's schooling. The former were attractive to parents who were dissatisfied with the academic shortcomings of State schools and frustrated in their desire to have an impact on their children's education. This discredit and distrust created a rhetoric based upon the ideals not only of 'free choice' and 'parental rights,' but also of 'children's rights'.

Another catalyst of the 'alternative' school movement is the new rhetoric that embraces all things that are considered alternative. The term (Badie & Vidal, 2017) is a blank slate that can be used in different ways to characterise all manner of aspirations. In today's society, choice has become a social value (Duvoux & Jenson 2011); and politicians have been quick to jump on the bandwagon. Going with an 'alternative' implies taking a step aside so as to perceive things 'differently,' though without always specifying what exactly it is that is alternative about any particular 'alternative.' It comes down to being able to choose something that is not the norm, while (most often) criticizing dominant values. However, in recent years the French middle and upper classes, through increasingly rigorous monitoring of their children's schooling, have brought into being a sort of French Parentocracy; that is, an approach in which 'a child's education increasingly depends on the wealth and wishes of parents, rather than on the abilities and efforts of students' (Brown, 1990, p. 66). The rhetoric of parental 'free choice' thrives in this environment. The fact that parents are increasingly involved in the education and schooling of their children expresses their desire to choose freely – or in other words, to exercise parental sovereignty. This rhetoric of 'free choice' has been well established in France since the major demonstrations of 1984, mostly by parents on the right, or even the extreme right of the political spectrum, to protest against Socialist education minister Alain Savary's efforts to turn education into a 'social welfare project.' Within this movement, there remains tension between the rights of parents and the rights of children.

<sup>7</sup> The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which assesses the achievement of 15-year-old students, has revealed poor results for France (OECD, 2019). Compared to 2014, France dropped five places in the ranking of OECD countries and thus moved from eighteenth to twenty-third place out of 79.



The third factor contributing to the popularity of 'alternative' schooling is the change in parenting styles and the revival of the 'intensive mothering' model (Hays, 1998). Intensive mothering is a child-centred vision that sees selfless women spending a lot of time, money, and energy raising their children. Some scholars even suggest the concept of 'total motherhood,' describing a tendency that mothers are expected to become experts in a number of areas, including safety: they must protect their children from any and all threats (or possible threats) that might hinder the optimal developmental of their child (Wolf, 2007). Others suggest that the term 'good parenting' (Martin, 2014) in public discourse is promoting a certain vision of parenting. For instance, the European Council published in 2006 some recommendations encouraging 'positive parenting.' Both private and public actors are called upon to stand as parenting models.

### 3 Research question, outlines, and methods

In this paper, I address the following question: In what ways do the relations between the French State and the parents of school children qualify as 'power relationships'? My research was conducted prior to the implementation of the August 24, 2021 bill that placed such rigid restraints on parents' school choices, but during a period (2017–2020) of growing parental discontent. To understand the tension between the State and parental perspectives, I looked at public policy development at different levels. First, I will sum up the ways in which the French State regulated alternative forms of schooling as it continued to exert a growing level of control. Second, I will describe the level of confidence in the State attested to by respondents to a survey, with particular attention to the institution of the school. Finally, I will describe the militant trajectories of some mothers that I interviewed, highlighting how their schooling choices are key to understanding their mobilization.

To understand the way in which school policy was being implemented, I relied on institutional data (parliamentary documents and press releases). To understand how school policy was received by parents, I used data collected in France between 2017 and 2020 that combined interviews with parents (72), answers to an online survey<sup>8</sup> (714) conducted before the bill of August 24 was proposed, and an interview with a civil servant at the Ministry of National Education that was conducted in October 2020, shortly after Macron's announcement (1). Families were mostly recruited through social networks, via Facebook groups in particular, and through independent schools that afforded me direct contact with families. My contact with the parents of children in alternative schools was made via an online questionnaire. To participate, parents had to have at least one child being homeschooled or registered in an alternative school.

I chose to study families with fairly extensive experience of these schooling options, between four and five years on average, because my interest lay in situations where the parents had stuck with the option they had chosen, regardless of whether their choice was initially a

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<sup>8</sup> The survey was sent to associations of homeschooling families, Facebook groups of homeschooling families, and directors of independent schools in France who forwarded it to the parents. For the analyses, parents who had enrolled their child in a religious independent school were removed.

positive one or made under some sense of constraint. I maintained a lasting relationship with the parents I interviewed, staying in touch with them by various means throughout my research. Some discussions took place after Macron's announcement.

Thematic analysis of the interviews was carried out using NVivo, and the interviews were also examined via historical timelines and portraits of a smaller number of respondents who represented ideal-types. The interviews were conducted with 59 women and 13 men and concerned 157 children of primary school age as defined by the French National Education system. Their average age was between seven-and-a-half and eight years, and the average family size was two to three children. Most of the families were white, heterosexual couples. Ten were single-parent families. Only one family was in a homosexual union. A few families were bi-cultural, but in only one case was there an ethnically mixed union (Brun, 2019). I made contact with one mother from an ethnic minority who had opted for home schooling but was unable to maintain it as she became unavailable. In addition, I observed Muslim mothers at homeschooling meetings in Paris, but I experienced difficulty approaching them.

The parent population came mainly from the middle and upper classes and had a high level of education. In the qualitative study, 24 were executives and senior professionals, 16 were craftsmen, merchants, and entrepreneurs, 13 were mid-level professionals, and three were non-professional employees. Stay-at-home mothers made up the rest of the population. Among those who were employed, 11 mothers were 'mompreneurs' (Landour, 2015) and 18 parents (four of them male) were self-employed. Almost half (34) of the respondents had a master's degree, fifteen a bachelor's degree, seven a Diploma of Higher Education, and five a PhD. Four had high school diplomas, and seven had received a vocational training certificate. In the quantitative survey, 37.5 per cent were executives and senior professionals, 37.3 per cent intermediate professionals, 9.9 per cent non-professional employees, 7.5 per cent craftsmen, merchants, and entrepreneurs, 1.5 per cent working-class professionals, and 0.9 per cent farm operators. Two-and-a-half percent had no employment status; they were for the most part stay-at-home moms.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Regulating independent choices

Analysis has shown that private choice is much more strictly regulated in France than in other Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, where individual freedoms are more often and vigorously defended (Ollion, 2017). According to Ollion, 'If sects have been more problematic in France than in other countries, it is less because they have contravened religious norms than because they have transgressed state norms' (Ollion, 2017, p. 136). He concludes from this that the French government excels at establishing norms and enforcing them against practices deemed deviant. In this he follows Bourdieusian theory according to which the State has a 'monopoly on the imposition of ways of seeing and doing.'

Since 2007, deputies at the French National Assembly have discussed the issue of parental agency over their children's education. There have been amendments to laws proposing to increase regulations on families. In 2007, Mr. Fenech and Mr. Vuilque (respectively president and rapporteur of the Commission of Inquiry on the Influence of Sectarian Movements and the Consequences of their Practices on the Physical and Mental Health of Minors) tabled four amendments, which were not passed. One of them stated:



Parents whose children are subject to compulsory schooling must, to benefit from homeschooling, justify a state of health or disability of their child, a displacement of the family or any other real and serious reason. No more than two families may receive instruction in the same home. The children concerned are subject, from the first year and every year, to an investigation by the competent town hall.

The Minister Delegate for the Family, Philippe Bas, declared his opposition to this amendment, which, in his view, went against parents' freedom of choice of education.

In 2016, right-wing deputy Éric Ciotti put forward a bill, which did not pass. It proposed, along similar lines, requiring prior authorization for homeschooling from the relevant academic authority that would be granted only in very specific situations: if there was a need for medical care; a disability requiring schooling in a medico-social institution; sports or artistic activities; if the parents were itinerant; or if geographical distance from a school made attending it impossible. In 2018, two amendments from various deputies proposed a system of prior authorization for independent schools (n°39) and homeschooling (n°42), as part of a bill aimed at simplifying and better regulating the establishment and functioning of independent schools. This bill was enacted on April 3, 2018.

Finally, after lowering the age of compulsory education to the age of three (by means of the Law for a School of Trust, 2019), Emmanuel Macron announced on October 2, 2020, the prohibition of homeschooling and the reinforcement of control over independent schools. The 2019 law seems to have foreshadowed Macron's announcement. In the preamble to that law, the Ministry of Education recognized school as being a place of emancipation. School was a collective concern that must be individually appropriated: 'Fulfilling this double republican promise is the condition of the cohesion of the nation as well as the freedom of each citizen' (bill of December 5, 2018, p. 3). The law called for the reinforcement of State oversight and control over instruction in families. Those parents who were more accepting of the school logic complied with the State, while others defended their pedagogical choices and resented this interference – in particular, families who adhered to a philosophy of natural education and argued that State oversight of academic matters should not become, in effect, State guardianship of children.

As most of the deputies had thus far failed to pass their amendments, the decision of the President of the French Republic was the first real engagement in the battle against what was viewed as a dangerous sectarian-type instrumentalization of homeschooling and independent schools. It is very difficult to measure the degree of actual peril that this movement posed to the State or how real was the abuse allegedly caused by these schooling alternatives, as we have no relevant data. In a brief interview a few days after Emmanuel Macron's announcement, a civil servant at the Ministry of National Education in charge of the academic oversight of homeschooling families in a department close to the Ile-de-France region where working-class families of foreign migratory origin are concentrated, expressed surprise.

I think that there are a few [parents who do not officially declare that they are homeschooling their children], and now, precisely on account of Macron's announcement, there will be more. But they are few, and they have no interest in not declaring themselves. None. But... it's so out of context. I'm telling you, I've seen one. How long have I been doing this? Since 2014–2015? Yes, it's been five years. I had [experience of] one family that I have no doubt about anymore. There, we had frankly, we had certainties, we made a pedagogical report; besides, I remember that the report of the social worker was alarming. (Alexia, civil servant in charge of overseeing homeschooling families, Master's Degree in mathematics)

According to Alexia, noncompliance for religious reasons was in the minority, but a few such cases had been identified by the Minister of National Education (MNE). She also mentioned that there had been families who did not comply with French law to the extent that their names did not even appear in the population registers. Later in the interview, she told me that although she had met families whose religious beliefs were visible to the eye, their children's development was 'perfectly in line with the expectations of the program, including cultural openness and sport.' The normative requirements imposed on such sects, as described by Ollion (2017), seemed to operate in the same way as those imposed on families perceived as deviant by the State.

On a national news channel (LCI), the MNE, Jean-Michel Blanquer, also defended the bill: 'The idea is that there should be less instruction at home, because in previous times it has been used to the benefit of sometimes radical structures, so we give ourselves the instrument to fight against radicalism, Islamist in particular, when it leads to withdrawing children from school, which is an abuse.' Faced with Emmanuel Macron's republican project, parents expressed opposition to the notion that their children were the children of the Republic, preferring to retain the primary parenting role for themselves. They cited their right, as parents, to choose their children's education according to the terms established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stipulates: 'Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children' (UDHR, Art. 26.3). This rhetoric of 'human rights' is a relatively new addition to the advocacy arsenal available to families. According to Aurinies and Davies, "Choice" as a social cause avoids the imposition of ideals on others, and stresses commonalities rather than differences' (Aurinies & Davies, 2003). A recently published article by Júlia Mourão Permoser and Kristina Stoeckel has exposed how the conservative network uses of human-rights arguments to achieve its goals: 'Actors from all political traditions have started adopting the language and strategies of human rights to pursue their political aims, often in direct contradiction to one another (Perugini and Gordon 2015)' (Permoser & Stoeckel, 2020). This extensive use of one strategy by proponents of various hues, with different reference points, makes it difficult to sort out who is who, which of course further complicates the defence of independent schooling choices.

The two parties involved – the State and families – do not frame homeschooling the same way. The State talks about 'school avoidance,'<sup>9</sup> a factor that is not uncommon in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. To solve this problem, it has set up 'anti-avoidance schooling' units in certain places in conjunction with prefectures and specialized prevention associations with a mission to fight radicalization. Homeschooling families talk instead about seeking another form of education, one that does not take place in school. Parents invoke the 'right of parents to educate their children' as they wish, while the State invokes the 'right of children to demand' that the State protect them from parental abuse, ensure that their right to education is exercised, and protect their right to freedom of conscience. For instance, at the beginning of 2020, the parents of children attending the Carré Libre democratic school (Quimper, Brittany) were ordered by the administrative court of Rennes to enrol them in another school within 15 days of this decision. Following a second review on December 13, 2019, the school, which had opened in 2016, had not provided sufficient evidence that the children

<sup>9</sup> In response to the terrorist threat, a public policy aimed at preventing radicalisation was developed under the aegis of the Ministry of the Interior. Part of this policy is directed towards the school environment, both to prevent the radicalisation of young people but also that of their families.

would be able to acquire the common base of knowledge, skills, and culture that the law required them to possess by the time they turned 16. On Wednesday, January 22, parents filed a petition with the Council of State to challenge the decision of the administrative court.<sup>10</sup> This decision was especially difficult for those parents who had opted for the democratic school as a remedial solution to their child's difficulties in the Republic school:

For many children, previously in a situation of school failure, or victims of harassment in their colleges, the Carré Libre even represents, as the inspectors themselves acknowledge in one of their reports, [...] a possible source of new confidence for children who have left the school system due to serious academic difficulties and who need to reconstruct themselves. (Press release on January 10, 2020 by the European Association for Democratic Education)

Indeed, parents most definitely do sometimes make an alternative schooling choice in the hope that it will give their child a second chance (Legavre, 2020). According to the same press release, the decision to enrol their children in this school was a positive 'educational choice' made by families opting for 'an innovative pedagogy based on self-directed learning (Sudbury type).' In support of their argument, it was again Article 26-3 of the UDHR that was cited. As we have seen, these schooling choices, as often as not, place parents in a tense relationship with the State, thus creating a space for politicization. One mother interviewed after Macron's announcement thought that the only solution left for her would be more cooperation with the State:

Either we should curtail our freedoms a little by accepting more control or present an educational project like that in Quebec<sup>11</sup> (Canada). In England, homeschooled children can participate in certain school activities, for example chemistry demonstrations, which are difficult to set up at home. (Brigitte, Muslim, homeschooling mum, Master's Degree, bookseller, four children aged 24, 20, 16, and 12 years)

Indeed, with every new proposal to limit independent schools and homeschooling, parents who seek these options find themselves entangled in new relationships with the State. It might be enlightening to look at their interactions with public institutions in general.

#### 4.2 Alternative schooling choices in relation to attitudes toward other public institutions

Several questions in my survey, based on a non-probability sample, relate to the level of trust in public institutions of French parents who have opted for alternate education.<sup>12</sup> Overall, 56.7 per cent of respondents tend to have total or moderate confidence in public institutions<sup>13</sup> (Figure 2).

<sup>10</sup> Le Carré Libre: les familles ont déposé un recours devant le Conseil d'État. *Le Telegramme*, January 22, 2020. <https://www.letelegramme.fr/finistere/quimper/le-carre-libre-les-familles-ont-depose-un-recours-devant-le-conseil-d-etat-22-01-2020-12484981.php>

<sup>11</sup> In Quebec, homeschooling parents must submit a learning project, a template of which is available on the government website: <http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca>

<sup>12</sup> The question of the mistrust of institutions (school, tax, politics) is studied within the ANR (French National Agency for Research) PROFET ('Practices and ordinary representations of the governed vis-à-vis the State').

<sup>13</sup> Nearly one third (32.9 per cent) of respondents declared themselves 'not confident at all' or 'somewhat unconfident,' 9.6 per cent responded 'I don't know, I can't say,' and 0.8 per cent did not answer the question.

Public schools seem to be a special case, however, as 68.6 per cent of respondents reported having ‘no confidence at all’ or ‘little confidence’ in them (Figure 3). This relationship of mistrust between French parents and schools has been widely studied by educational sociologists (Kakpo, 2013; Pagis, 2014; Lignier, 2012a), sociologists of religion (Raison du Cleuzious, 2019), and also by public authorities. The prominent failure of the voluntarist policy of school democratization in the 1980s and 1990s (Beaud, 2003) crystallized what was before a more diffuse criticism and brought attention, in 2019, to the deterioration of the public schools, often in concert with an elitist vision of the ideal education system. Sociologically oriented criticism of the French school continues, but alongside it there has arisen more recently what is termed an ‘artistic’ critique (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2011) that charges schools with an inability to link success and personal fulfilment. This critique, which values the authenticity of the individual, is echoed by families who value self-expression in the school experience, giving a central place to individual flourishing. Mistrust between parents and the school institution is not new, to be sure, but the testimonies gathered in my research reveal some new sources of parental discontent. The people I interviewed did not so much contest the content of teaching as the way in which it was transmitted: that is, with the way the schools were run and the way children were treated.

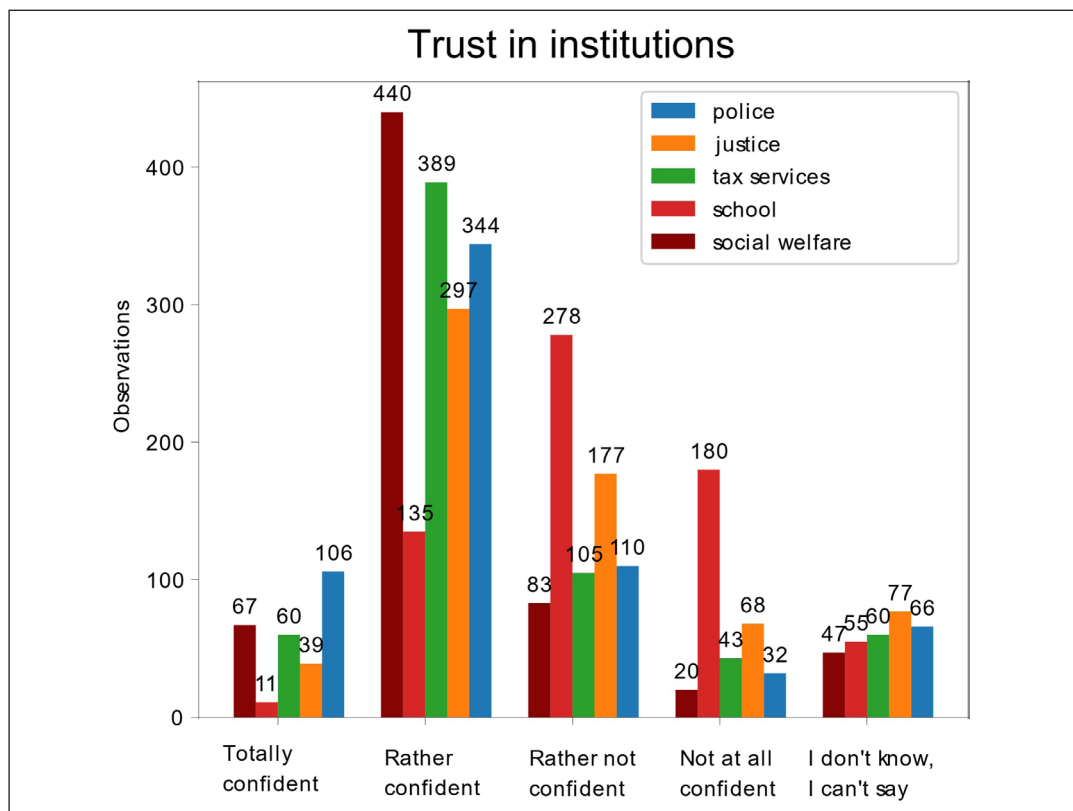


Figure 2

Source: Questionnaire Pauline Proboeuf. N = 666.

The question was: “Do you trust the following public services?”

Of all the institutions listed in the survey, however, the one that respondents trusted the least was the justice system: 36.7 per cent report having 'no confidence at all' or 'little confidence' in it. 'Total confidence' or 'moderate confidence' was reported by 50.5 per cent. Some of the respondents indicated in open-field responses to the survey a distrustful relationship with hospitals, an institution that was not even among the public services listed in the survey. A few respondents also mentioned hospitals in interviews. Lis was one of them:

I come back to the fact that I was a nurse, I worked in a hospital, and for me the hospital institution and the National Education have the same functioning, the same problems, and what troubles me is that it's all political [...]. And, in fact, humans today are taken care of as if they were a car being restored, or [...] being built. It's budgets. It's completely dehumanized. And whether it's medicine, health or education, it's all dehumanized. (Lis, homeschooling mum, three-year university level, marital and family counsellor, four children aged 19, 17, 14, and 8 years)

Lis was talking to me about her dual experience as a civil servant and a parent. It seemed important to her to link these two statuses because it allowed her to justify her choice of homeschooling by placing the blame securely on the public service network. Her words illustrate the way in which mistrustful relationships can cross the border between different State institutions. Unfortunately, it is difficult to quantify responses of this nature.

Some parents go so far as to insist that education should be entirely separate from the state, recalling the position taken by nineteenth-century anarchist thinking (Wagnon, 2020):

It's a political choice in the first place, in the sense that we don't want our children to be raised by the State. We really see the Ministry of National Education like that, an education of the State for the State. So that's the first thing, to help our daughter become an individual, not someone formatted by the State. (Chloé, three-year university level, stay-at-home mother, three children, 12 year-old homeschooled, 7 and 5 year-olds enrolled in a parental<sup>14</sup> Steiner school)

Parents also question the link between school and emancipation. Alternative schooling choices go beyond pedagogical matters to take in ideology. Many question whether the schooling of their children should fall to schools; whether this is the purview or the right of schools. Instead, they cite their rights as parents to make decisions about their children's education: 'Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children' (UDHR, Art. 26.3). According to Philippe Bongrand (2019), by participating in the publicization of homeschooling the State will in fact contribute to creating a defiant socialization of its citizens:

On the one hand, the state's disapproval of this form of instruction, and the prevalence of security discourse in national public communication, allows families who choose to do so to perceive themselves as unjustly suspected. On the other hand, this peculiar form of nationalization is aimed, in a large number of cases, at parents who educate as a family by default, sometimes even as a last resort, after having requested or experimented with all possible schooling arrangements, because the State has not been able to meet their expectations. (Bongrand, 2019)

In fact, every experience of having their educational options called into question anchors parents more firmly in the common cause of 'school choice,' over and above differences

<sup>14</sup> This means that the school is managed by parents.

in their other positions and goals. Whether or not the sense they have of being under assault is fantasised or objective, it has real consequences. According to a press release issued by a national homeschooling association, their membership list has quadrupled since Emmanuel Macron's intervention.

### 4.3 Alternative schooling choices and political competence

Here we will focus on the links between educational choices and social movements. Some of the parents who participated in the survey may have quite idiosyncratic reasons for their choice of 'independent' schooling, quite close to a phenomenon known as 'school zapping' (Langouët & Léger, 1997). Others (27/64) reported strong political convictions that influenced their choice, though this consideration may not have been present from the beginning but rather have developed when later experiences altered their views.

Organizations and support groups play a watchdog role in alerting parents to the State's encroachments on their family freedoms. This alternative network constitutes a secondary space of socialization in which parents can assert their preferences and values and build up a stock of knowledge and know-how that enhances their political competence (Talpin, 2010). In addition to collective mobilizations, politicization can take place at the individual level: some parents undertake research on their own into issues related to education and use scientific sources to inform and enhance their positions. Not all become vocal activists in the cause of independent schooling options. Those who are closely integrated into a support group and who have a long history of independent schooling their own children are the most likely to take this path. They put in the most energy, and the mission then becomes a part of their identity.

For some mothers who were interviewed, involvement in homeschooling had consequences that took them beyond this one experiment with individual choice. The homeschooling network indirectly taught them the skills needed not only to advocate for 'the cause of children,' but also to engage more fully in other areas of civic life (Dolto, 1985). This led some of the mothers who were interviewed into professional retraining, as what began as a defence of educational choices took on wider significance. I saw non-politicized mothers move from a choice made for convenience to a political choice:

For family life it [school] was not comfortable, we chose homeschooling at that time more for comfort than for political conviction. And then, little by little, you see, things came up, understandings came about, and today my choice is clearly political. But it was not from the outset. (Lis, homeschooling mum, third-year university level, marital and family counsellor, 4 children aged 19, 17, 14, and 8 years)

Lis describes here the shift from practical to political considerations. She had become involved at the national level in a homeschooling association, and her participation strengthened her sense of belonging to a community. She recalls her first meeting: 'we discovered another environment, another system of thought, a place where we felt welcomed there, you see for what we were, there is always a social viewpoint that we no longer perceived at all.' Interest in the public sphere seemed to assert itself alongside the choice to homeschool. And for Lis, as for others, involvement in homeschooling led to a long-term civic commitment.



The same pattern of discourse characterizes some parents whose children are in alternative schools. Naëlle, too, believes that her political position is expressed through her choice of school and defends her vision of society:

It wasn't a choice... against.... It's just to... bring, contribute to ensuring that there are other models and that we can draw inspiration from them. That's my militant side where I really assume that my child is not in a regular school because I didn't mean like getting into a battle over what goes on in a public school. Instead, I wanted to create something that would be appropriate for me. I don't want to be... struggling. Uh... within a system. I don't have the energy for that. So I find it easier to put... even a lot of energy into a system where I know we're all going in the same direction than to struggle internally. (Naëlle, master's degree, co-director of a communication agency, one child aged four years old enrolled in a parental Steiner school)

Naëlle chose the Steiner school because she believed that it supported the development of body, mind, and, in particular, creativity. The latter she felt was not a focus in public schools. She had environmental convictions, too, and she wanted to see more attention paid to ecological issues in the curriculum.

As we see in the case of Lis, some parents found in the school choice movement an opportunity to invest themselves in a community project, in this case education. They became involved in 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2008), which are composed of three dimensions: mutual engagement based on solidarity and trust, a joint enterprise centred on children's education, and a shared repertoire of organizational tools and methods that they themselves helped to develop. This is particularly true for parental schools, as it was in the case of Naëlle, where parents are integral part of the school project. We might compare this approach to the principle of decentralisation in political science. Rather than sitting by to watch a centralized State model operate, parents take an active part in a local model. Simply choosing differently signifies to others that it is possible to act differently, pushing against the famous dictum 'There is no alternative' (TINA).<sup>15</sup>

The fact of getting involved, of putting my children in a democratic school... I consider that I'm participating a little bit in something. It's a form of militancy somehow. Hmm, because I talk about it around me, I try to explain, at work I talk about it... though not to everybody because I know that there are some people it's not worth talking about it to, I'm going to be rebuffed dryly, but then I respect that, but then there are people who are interested so... Here I am, broadcasting some little news... (Angélique, IT project manager, Master's Degree, two children aged eight and five enrolled in a democratic school)

The choice of an alternative school thus extends a pre-existing militant commitment to the educational sphere. The space of the school then becomes a space of contestation, allowing the parent to signify his or her allegiance to an alternative system of values. Lucia, for example, contrasts a technologized society with a society that glorifies nature and living things:

Here we are, at a time when today's children are one or two years old, they have touch-screen tablets in their hands, well [...] my daughter, she's building huts, she's learning to carve sticks, she's outside... she's listening to the birds singing, she recognises the flowers... she's becoming aware of

<sup>15</sup> 'TINA' was a slogan often used by the Conservative British prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

that, I tell myself that's... that's the basic knowledge of things. How... How can you teach children to defend this planet if they don't even know what nature is? (Lucia, three-year university level, no professional activity, two children aged five and two years, the older enrolled in a parental Steiner school)

Protests of this nature take place on the left as well as on the right flank of the political chessboard. Indeed, some parents cite a desire for independence from the National Education System as their motivation for choosing an independent school. Catholic parents on the right have expressed worry over the issues of teaching using the analytic phonics method, learning history thematically, and education for gender equality. In 2014, this last issue sparked parental mobilisations in the form of 'school boycott days' (JRE) and – less immediately visible, but more wide-spread and permanent – protests against various social networks, leading the MNE to question itself and to reflect on the issue of 'educational' programs.<sup>16</sup>

With reference to Hirschman's model triptych 'exit, voice, loyalty' (1970) parents dissatisfied with the public system are opting to 'exit.' We have seen that this choice could, for some, be politicized. However, actors from independent school systems tend to depoliticize the choice of school by emphasizing the desire to offer parents diversified options. Eric Mestrallet, a business leader who is very active in the creation of schools in Priority Neighborhoods<sup>17</sup> (he founded the Alexandre Dumas course and the Espérance Banlieues network, among others), believes that schools should prioritize meeting parental demand over offering a standardized service.

## 5 Conclusion

In his speech on separatism in October 2020, Emmanuel Macron quoted Ferdinand Buisson, one of the main actors in the implementation of French school laws under the Third Republic:

To make a Republican – he wrote –, you have to take a human being, however small and humble he may be [...] and give him the idea that he must think for himself, that he owes neither faith nor obedience to anyone, that it is up to him to seek the truth and not to receive it ready-made from a teacher, a headmaster, a leader, whoever he may be.

In doing so, Macron reaffirmed the nation's attachment to the legacy of the Third Republic, which placed all its hopes on the institution of education as a factory of citizens capable of sustaining the Republican regime.

Alternative schooling choices contribute to blurring the lines between instruction and education, non-professionals and teachers. This legislative context places 'the school' in the field of political science (Barrault-Stella & Goastellec, 2015) by recalling that the relationship to school is always a relationship to the State. We show that those who choose alternative schooling are caught up in a power relationship with the State. Respondents tend to have less confidence in public schools than in most other public institutions, and not infrequently have a countercultural bent. This might well be due to State regulations fostering a defiant

<sup>16</sup> These programs refer to interdisciplinary training areas that allow for student engagement through experiential activities and aim to build reflective and psychosocial skills (Audigier, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> The National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) define these as 'a new priority geography of urban policy, established by the planning law for urban affairs and urban cohesion of 21 February 2014'.

stance towards the State. By trying to silence divergent voices, the government risks further enflaming anti-institutional discontent and thereby widening the gap between families and the State. It risks moving France from a model of 'inclusion through control' (Farges & Tenret, 2018) to a model of exclusion through coercion. At the time of the legislative debates, some families, distraught, announced their determination to continue educating their children even if it meant disobeying or leaving France. Will these words be turned into action? Not enough data is available yet to justify a full evaluation of the effects of the new law that was just passed last year, but further research could be undertaken to determine how families will position themselves in the future.

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