

# AVIS

## DU HAUT CONSEIL DE L'ÉVALUATION DE L'ÉCOLE

# FRANCE AND INTERNATIONAL EVALUATION OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

France's Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de l'école (High Council for the Evaluation of Education), deeming it necessary to evaluate how the French education system and, more broadly speaking, French society, fares in international comparison surveys, has done so in a two-phase process. First, it has looked at the comparative surveys on student (and adult) learning – the focus of this opinion – then, considered the international comparison indicators on educational systems. The intention is not to assess the French educational system against other systems worldwide,<sup>1</sup> but to measure the extent to which such comparisons are useful, examine the part France plays in devising the said comparisons and determine how much interest is given to them in the country.

To bear out the discussions that led to the drafting of this first opinion, the High Council asked Norberto Bottani, Director of the Unit for Research in Education, at the Department of Public Instruction in the Canton of Geneva, and Pierre Vrignaud, Professor of Psychology at the University of Paris X-Nanterre, to present it with a report. The said report – which, like all reports commissioned by the High Council, does not necessarily reflect its opinion, but rather contains the analyses and suggestions of the report's authors – is public and may be read on the High Council's site: <http://cisad.adc.education.fr/hcee> under the « Publications » section.

### International comparison surveys: an essential means for observing and steering educational systems

International student achievement assessments have become an incontestable (albeit not uncontested) means of observing and steering educational systems. They are considered – and rightfully so – as one of the preferred ways of appraising their results.

Since the early 1960s, when they were initiated by the educational specialists who founded the IEA<sup>2</sup> to deal with implementation aspects, surveys of this kind have developed widely, bringing out three broad trends:

- ♦ rather than looking at the extent to which participating countries succeed in achieving the objectives set out by their school curricula there is an increasing move to attempt to evaluate the skills or behaviours preparing learners, in general, for professional and social life in today's world, . Two reasons are often put forth to explain this: from a technical standpoint, the curricula differ from country to country, making

1. The High Council made extensive use of international comparison data to establish its «*Diagnostic Information on the French School System*», Opinion 9, October 2003.

2. IEA, *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement*, was founded in 1961.

comparison difficult; while, from a more political, or even ideological standpoint, it seems more appropriate to evaluate skills considered within everyone's reach rather than to look at academic achievement, when comparing the benefits of teaching systems, at least at the end of the compulsory school years.

- ♦ the desire to be able to evaluate changes in skills levels over time and to connect such changes to the features of school and social systems has led, first, to the creation of survey programmes capable of yielding results that are comparable over time and, second, to increasingly detailed surveys about teaching resources and conditions, social environment, etc., in addition to the tasks asked of the students;
- ♦ the OECD, an institution whose original purpose was more economic than educational, has gradually taken over control of the most important programmes in such surveys and broadly promotes the dissemination and use of results of those programmes and those carried out by the IEA. Meanwhile, the European Commission, rather than promoting specific systems to feed into Europe's indicator systems on education, intended to evaluate progress in the Lisbon Process, is willing to use the results from OECD surveys.

The above changes aspire to respond to the questions that political leaders have raised with regard to their educational systems, above all, with regard to the contribution of the said systems to economic and social development; the participation of an ever-increasing number of countries in surveys carried out under the aegis of the OECD has naturally led to the construction of a methodological approach developed as a universal model measuring the end-purpose of educational systems.

### **International comparison surveys: an increasingly complex «machinery» not free from flaws and sometimes lacking in transparency.**

The developments described above have turned such surveys – or rather such survey programmes – into «a huge machinery», so complex that its foundations and results can end up lacking transparency.

- ♦ The test protocols and questions used are the result of compromise between the participating countries, whose conceptions of skills in the fields of reading, mathematics, the sciences or behaviour in schools or society, intended to reflect the demands of the world today, can be different, as are their educational and social systems. Such compromises – often rooted more in Anglo-American, rather than Latin, thought – results from the power balances and differing degrees of involvement between the countries and their experts, and can be deemed more or less satisfactory by any of the various parties involved;
- ♦ Despite the considerable progress achieved as international comparison surveys have developed, it is

impossible to guarantee that their results are free from bias of various kinds, especially as the desire to extend the same survey programmes, considered of universal value, to an increasing number of countries, extends the range of levels of development, cultures, languages, etc. which must be taken into account;

- ♦ The skill measurement models currently implemented by international survey programmes have been considerably refined: they assume, in order to be valid, a number of conditions not always found side by side, but offer the advantage of making it easier to show test results in the form of competency scales. As such, they incite political leaders and the public to read the results more as a ranking, if not as a «hit parade» of countries and education systems, as compared to all other forms of data interpretation, and sometimes at the expense of those forms, even as the results are made widely available to the research community and though the benefits of such surveys lie more in the questions they raise, rather than in the responses they claim to provide;
- ♦ Conducting and coordinating surveys which, like PISA 2003, now include over 250 000 students in over forty countries, hold particularly large economic stakes. They put considerable resources in the balance and require scientific, technical and logistical ability that only a few companies or institutions – for the most part Anglo-American and non-European – are considered capable of bringing together. Moreover, the desire to carry out surveys whose results are comparable over time encourages going back to the same survey designers each time.

Without going into detail, it is important to be aware that measurements of student (and adult) skills levels are not as simple, robust and universal as the metric system. In the field of psychometrics – or, to use a better-suited term, edometrics, meaning educational metrics – the measurements are constructions that result from political and methodological choices. Those choices can also have commercial dimensions.

### **France has taken part in a large number of such surveys, but has played a minor role in developing them and has not grasped the magnitude of what is at stake and the value tied to it.**

- ♦ While France has participated in a good half of the surveys, it has done so in a rather haphazard manner, at least up until the last few years. Its participation has been in connection, most of all, with surveys focusing on the main areas of education: reading (or literacy, as is said today), mathematics and the sciences.
- ♦ Whereas France's first few times participating were spurred by various organisations and remained relatively low-key, since the 1990s, the Ministry of National

Education, through its Evaluation and Forecasting Directorate (DEP), has steered France's involvement in the surveys. Its desire to have external comparison information in order to report data on the French educational system was undeniably one of the major drivers in the Ministry's decision to put its Evaluation Directorate in charge of this. The results of the surveys have consistently been reported and interpreted in *The State of Education*.

♦ However, the Ministry's most significant effort with regard to evaluating student achievement came, over the course of the 1990s, with the development of a diagnostic evaluation system, the prime purpose of which is to facilitate the development of teaching practices. The resources available have not been enough to develop, at the same time, significant investments in evaluation-appraisal design and methods at the national level, and even less so at the international level,<sup>3</sup> especially as, where universities are considered, France's know-how in educational metrics, while existent, as in the field of comparative education surveys, has not been promoted in a coordinated manner.

♦ Most of all, political and educational leaders have not realised the full implications of the surveys, whether from a scientific standpoint or with regard to how the educational system is steered, and they have always had little interest for the methods and results of such surveys, as for all evaluations of our education system. As the High Council has already observed,<sup>4</sup> the surveys carried out to evaluate the French educational system, some of which are innovative and of particular interest, do not really fit into an overall approach to evaluate the system and are not used enough to guide it. This also applies to international surveys. Moreover, France's reluctance to carry out external evaluations, whether international or national, remains particularly strong, whether amongst political decision-makers or educational professionals, and it is always difficult – and often considered unfounded – to subject our Schooling System – supposed to be one of the best in the world – to evaluation other than that arising from immediate intuition or personal experience.

♦ As concerns the topic at hand, this has led to very little involvement on the part of France's political and scientific communities in designing survey programmes, whether at the IEA or at the OECD. Those responsible for educational and teaching policy left the experts and technicians to decide about participating in surveys and investing in their design and conduct. To illustrate, whereas the DEP did initiate, during France's Presidency of the European Union in 1995, the creation of the European Network of policy-makers for the evaluation of education systems (RERPESE), which coordinated the conduct of comparative surveys between European countries<sup>5</sup> and launched original methodological research showing that there exist alternative approaches for

international comparison,<sup>6</sup> the network never reserved actual support from the Ministry's political leaders.

♦ The High Council appreciates the efforts made, over recent years, with regard to analysing and circulating, both within and outside the education system, the results of the latest surveys and the more recurring follow-up of the design and methodological work carried out as a result of this, in particular since the major jolt delivered with the IALS survey on adult competencies<sup>7</sup>. While it notes, with interest, that the said efforts did lead to the mobilisation of a small network of French experts and the creation, at the DEP's initiative, of an European consortium that answered the call for tender launched by the OECD to carry out the first phase of the PISA programme, it cannot help note that the said actions do not achieve sufficient critical mass to have a real impact at the international level, unlike what other countries are developing in the same area.

**To take on its role in designing surveys of this kind and derive full benefit from making use of their results, France needs to equip itself with the resources needed to promote an European approach.**

♦ The High Council feels that the international comparison surveys of student achievement form an outsider's «view» which it is vital to combine with an insider's view, provided by national evaluations and surveys. For this reason, their full value as part of the evaluation and steering scheme for our education system needs to be recognised, though not to the exclusion of other tools, as a lack of national evaluations dealing directly with the objectives specific to our education system could lead to a situation in which international surveys are set as a universal educational model, or even, exaggerating slightly, where good performance in such surveys becomes the final or only objective of the education system.

♦ In order to take full advantage of the surveys and use their results in a clear-headed and calm manner, France needs to become much more actively involved in designing and carrying them out. This will require that:

3. This question was raised in the High Council's Opinion No. 2, *Assessing and Certifying Student Achievement Upon Completion of Lower Secondary School: Diploma and Evaluation-Report.*, June 2001.

4. See Opinion No. 3, *Strengths and Weaknesses of Evaluating the Educational System in France*, October 2001.

5. The results of the most recent survey were published in the memorandum entitled, «Evaluation of English Skills in Students Aged 15 to 16 in Seven European Countries», Evaluation Memorandum 04-01, March 2004, DEP-MEN, PARIS.

6. See *The use of National Reading Tests for International Comparisons: Ways of Overcoming Cultural Bias*, April 2001, and *Culturally Balanced Assessment of Reading (C-Bar)*, September 2003, two reports published under the aegis of the European Network of Heads of Evaluation Policy on Educational Systems.

7. The French Minister of National Education has chosen not to have France included in publications regarding the International Adult Literacy Survey, carried out in 1994. The astonishment sparked by France's results in the survey led a number of national and international audits to be carried out, confirming a number of the methodological questions raised on the topic.

♦ France's political leaders offer to actually exert their influence in the choices that international organisations make with regard to the design, time-frame and resources devoted to the surveys, whether at the OECD or in the European Union. They will need to incite the latter to develop its own surveys in order to feed into the indicators designed to report on the Lisbon objectives;

♦ France's political and scientific leaders provide resources both to the Ministry (the DEP and the heads of educational policy) and the research community, so that they may play an active part in designing the surveys, defining their protocols and using their results), this assuming major development in research and comparative surveys on education and in edometrics, supported by the scientific authorities in the relevant fields.



Remaining hesitant with regard to international comparisons of student achievement would be keeping alive the idea that our educational system is so specific that it could deal with internal evaluation and regulation alone. Such an attitude would be all the more regrettable as passivity with regard to the methods and analyses of international surveys and refusal to give consideration to the said surveys could result in having foreign educational models impressed upon France, in a world where competition is also developing in the educational field.

France needs to equip itself with the political and scientific tools needed to organise its education system, by being more active in every respect on the international comparative educational scene. It is very much likely that it cannot – or can no longer – do this alone. One of its priorities will thus need to be urging for the development of a strong European hub to design and carry out international comparative studies in the field of education.

## Avis du Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de l'école

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