Education systems urged to restructure: Why? What questions are really asked?

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1. Designing the education systems: between the architect's illusions and the burden of history

All countries are now used to describing their overall education structures offered by different agencies (public or private) as "educative systems". For example, we all have in mind the apparently perfect schemes like the ISCE (International Standard Classification of Education) which enables us to establish some comparison between the countries' systems[1].

However, as soon as we study the reality of a given country in depth we come to realise that the realities are far more complex, and that we wrongly think (and we often do) of **some "invisible hand" that could have created "one" unified, coherent, and transparent system** and to go even a little further, a "democratic" value common to most countries:

- Firstly, please note that in most countries, there are institutions that everyone knows as "out of the system" which are a legacy of history, such as the grammar schools in England or at a whole other level, the French "Grandes Ecoles". Most French officials will describe the differentiation between the Higher Education teaching in French Universities and in the "Grandes Ecoles" as non-systemic and counterproductive, but they cannot change what has defined the French way of selecting elites for so long.
- Secondly, most educational systems around the world are actually made of different parts, or have been structured so for historical reasons. For example, "primary" education is often followed by a "secondary" education and then by an education labelled as "Higher". This tripartite structure (for some systems, one should add the nursery and the vocational educations) is actually the result of **more or less successful attempts, to form a coherent sequence of elements that historically had their own logic.**

Even a system apparently as Cartesian and centralised as the French one, is actually nothing more than an often inconsistent aggregate, which creates unnecessary difficulties for the students. It is composed of three elements: firstly, a primary education designed only for the popular classes in the nineteenth century by the French Republic. Secondly, a secondary education whose cultural and social patterns were inherited from the Jesuits who outlined it in the sixteenth century and thirdly, a higher education at university, which were created in the Middle Ages, and include the "Grandes Ecoles" developed during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. This is to say nothing of the technical and vocational educations, which historically have yet another story and were developed separately from the rest. Contrary to popular belief, the French education system is not a "jardin à la française"!

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[1] For a long time, we limited ourselves to a typology of systems classified by groups that were based on the age of the initial diversification of studies between the students, by opposing the "**comprehensive**" countries to the "Germanic" countries (most of the German Länder, Austria and German-Switzerland) who promoted early separations from the age of 11.

Some predominantly Protestants countries (e.g. The Netherlands) have escaped both the Catholic centralism and characteristics inspired by the Latin countries. They never aspired to such a systematic design and gave much more room for autonomy of agencies and schools. However we can state that under various influences during the second half of the twentieth century, many countries became accustomed to thinking of their educational supply as a "system" accountable for a certain coherence regarding the public (e.g. the attempts to ensure consistency between the three "pillars" which traditionally make up the Belgian school, or in a completely different area, the English National Curriculum).

There is a more and more definite global tendency to regard and influence the existence of education systems as if they were coherent and rational, but the very nature of their constitution – that is, historical and unpredictable – makes them even more unstable when one attempts to apprehend them as systems.

2. Why are the previous patterns questioned?

The divisions in these systems did not cause any problems for a long time simply because it was a game played by the schools that could therefore marginalise a large portion of the population, as well as fend off political attention. Beyond the primary level, education concerned only a small portion of the population and the social status depended less on certifications and more on the schools one went to. The situation reversed when schooling became accessible to everyone and at the same time recurrent employment difficulties appeared.

It was only at the moment when, for various reasons, societies and governments started to question the education systems on their "eventual" effectiveness – both for individuals as well as for communities, and when we started, for example, to worry about issues such as 'competencies' or 'employability' that anyone queried the relevance of the structures. This point the question: **do we need a primary education, a "lower secondary" education, an "upper secondary" etc?.** Whether we put forward the needs of the economy with different skill levels, or those relevant to the civic world (e.g. producing citizens capable of living together according to common values), or even if the concern is more about pushing as many students as possible academically towards a further education certification (e.g. the EU's Lisbon Strategy), these are **end-results oriented approaches** which query the old systems as to whether their structure is still relevant to the new expectations.

In this questioning context, it appears that two of the traditional bridges should be reconsidered:
- The first one symbolised one way or another the end of compulsory education for all. The Scandinavian countries have, with some variations, given the example of a school for all with a strong social and political significance. Alternatively in 2005 France, which until that point had only an exam at the end of compulsory schooling (the French "collège") that held little significance (the "Brevet des collèges") both socially and in terms of further education, for the first time defined the objectives of compulsory schooling outside the traditions of French schools through an exceptional vote of Parliament.. The result was the "*socle commun de compétences*" **(common core of knowledge and skills)** needed by all pupils to '*successfully complete their schooling, pursue their education, build their personal and professional future and lead a successful life in society*'. This is no longer 'lower secondary education' justified by referring to studies in high school, but is the first corner stone for the creation of the **"socle commun" school, which will include primary and lower secondary education**. At the same time, the lycée, which is the last bastion of secondary education, has been greatly weakened, as it has been reduced to three years or even two if you take into account the fact

- To continue with the French example, other questions regarding Higher Education arise at the same time: are we now sure that it can be perceived as a unit, combining mass training and research? From the moment society believes (this is the case for all developed societies) that the skills required by the business world are more often at the level of higher education, success at this level becomes a real matter. High school, which until now has prepared its students for the Baccalaureate in "splendid isolation", is now questioned on how it prepares students for higher education. At the same time, the division of students into routes defined by the secondary education becomes a relevant matter too. Is higher education looking for this sort of division between students? Is this in a quantitative and qualitative fashion? Which should prevail? Upstream or downstream? For all these reasons, **a number of French education specialists are currently considering a package that would enclose 15/16 years old (end of compulsory schooling and** *socle commun*) **up to 21/22 years old, with the Baccalaureate in the middle and a Bachelor degree at the end of the cycle.**

Shaken, the French 'system' would change if these alterations were to be carried through, from a 5 (primary education) +4 (Brevet des collèges) +3 (Baccalaureate) structure to a 9 (socle commun school) +6 (Bachelor degree), with, of course, other professional qualifications at 9 +2, 9 +3, and perhaps 9 +5.

3. *Questions that must be addressed, and their systematic and political answers*

To take a step back from these examples, it seems that the need to redesign the systems raises two types of questions:

1) Should an educational system be **developed retroactively, from downstream to upstream**, from final and external expectations, for example in terms of skills or scientific level set as aims for all or for part of the population? One can see the benefits of this kind of concept: an excellent external justification of schools; we can also notice that this kind of positioning could easily become a caricature, and even a totalitarian one, because everything that would not be part of that higher goal would be considered as a waste of time. Or do we consider that education **– the schooling of a child – includes a certain number of intrinsic values** such as its very tempo, which includes things as precious as gratuitousness, self-fulfillment, wasted time, access to culture, etc. In that case, the system is designed less by addressing issues of professionalism or integration. The risk incurred may then be an educational system too self-referential, and not answerable to the social world, which is just as dangerous. The Lycée français, and others in Europe mainly concerned with pushing towards further education, come to forget two key points: shouldn't it deliver a custom message, and have a custom finality independent from Higher Education? The Italyan Lisesi, which lasts 5 years, is probably now a more confident system in terms of broadcasting its culture, without worrying too much about Higher Education.

2) When, how and how far should an education system **sort its students?** Different models coexist: at the end of the secondary education, Japanese students are still relatively homogeneous, quite undifferentiated. It is the same for Slovak or Italian students (the differences in curricula between Italian secondary schools are limited, and hold little influence on further education). English students' A-levels choices differentiate them strongly from one another, thus raising some questions about the meaning of such a parting. French students are differentiated between "menus" (i.e. "routes"), offering a balanced and almost healthy equilibrium: for example everyone studies history, science and more than anything philosophy. This composition is

Some technical and political questions:

- What does the old education temporal structure mean today, for example, in relation to the idea of the end of compulsory schooling at 14 or 16, even if it is unclear whether the cognitive, cultural and critical needs of all to live in a complex world can be covered at this age? For example, in France, even though we are starting to build a "socle commun" at 15, there is some interrogation on a possible "socle +" at 18.
- Should we let education establish its traditional switches and specialisations between students, or should we also listen to the economic world which requires an increased background and flexibility of the workforce? The old traditional school certification is somehow reassuring for everyone, but it may be quite irrelevant in terms of employment.

So GCSEs at 14 or 16? Baccalaureate with routes or "socle +"? Relevant at two levels (end of lower secondary and end of upper secondary education), these issues come together: our educational systems should be more systemic, firstly, so as to respond more clearly than ever to substantive issues. It seems that **the uncertainty of our times, as well as student's demands argue for a strengthening of the common core and of the common routes in order to delay irreversible diversification.**

Dreadful questions such as "but what kind of man do we ultimately want to train?" and "how to allow everyone to choose a little better his/her life?" no longer seem to be avoidable.