

The French Classes Nouvelles (1945-1952): Why is it so Difficult to Change Traditional Pedagogy?

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Abstract: At the first levels of French secondary education (pupils 11 to 15 years of age), the *classes nouvelles* between 1945 and 1952 involved an important experiment in secondary school pedagogy renewal. This attempt was part of a threefold movement towards the democratization of education that spanned the early twentieth century: the will to open second degree education to more pupils and, consequently, to transform traditional pedagogical practices and implement a school guidance system. After having set the origin of this experiment in the democratic Reform project carried out by the *Front Populaire* government before the Second World War, this article aims to describe the particular circumstances that preceded the decision to implant these *classes nouvelles* in 200 schools across France at the start of the 1945 school year; the paper focuses in particular on the pedagogical principles implemented and some significant local experiences. It explores the reactions of several players in this pedagogical renewal, and the reasons why this episode ended without immediate strong repercussions on the French educational system.

Keywords: French Classes Nouvelles; pupils' orientation; democratization; pedagogy renewal; New Education.

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the XXth century, the French school organization was questioned about its segregationist design of a school clientelism (in social classes terms); just after the First World War, some teachers imagined for the future a unique school system (called *Ecole unique*) instead of the two separate paths then existing (Les Compagnons, 1918, pp. 21-26 and Garnier, 2008). Indeed, primary education,

generalized as free of charge from 1881, mainly concerned the working classes. Even belonging to the State, secondary education was expensive¹ and consequently reserved for the upper classes (except some few cases called *boursiers*²); it was part of a search for social distinction, as shown by the existence of «elementary classrooms» (equivalent of primary ones), located in secondary schools, and expensive too. As said by Jules Ferry himself: « When you come to secondary education, there is no longer the same necessity [than for the primary education] and the claim would no longer be acceptable if you said». «Everyone has the right to secondary education. No, only those who are able to receive it, and who, by receiving it, are able to render a service to society, have this right [...]» (Ferry, 17.07.1880, in Robiquet, 1893-1898). A general reform of the educational system failed during the first part of the century; however, a certain democratization process took place, peculiarly when the secondary education became free of charge since the beginning of the thirties³. This democratization process was calling for a pedagogical renewal: you can't teach all pupils as you teach very selected pupils according to traditional methods; so, the models which stemmed from the New Education principles began to challenge seriously the State school pedagogical patterns. In the same movement, the perspective of a secondary education for all was asking the question about a scientific orientation of the pupils.

Several answers to these problems were attempted in France just before and just after the Second World War, under the names of *classes d'orientation* (1937) and *classes nouvelles* (1945). In this paper, our main point will be the experiment⁴ of *classes nouvelles* which existed since 1945 to 1952; however, in a historical perspective, we will examine the eventual similitudes and differences with the previous *classes d'orientation*. After having considered the origin of the *classes nouvelles* project, we will present their organization and their special pedagogy main lines, we will describe some examples of their functioning in different parts of the country (based on archives from the Ministry of Education and local administrations), we will examine the success and the problems raised. Last, we will ask about the reasons why they have been abandoned, and more generally about the difficult intersection between State dominant pedagogy and New Education pedagogical ideas.

¹ It will be so until the thirties, when the State secondary education was progressively made free of charge.

² Only few pupils stemmed from working classes were selected and received money to follow a secondary cursus.

³ A recent analysis of a panel of secondary schools by Antoine Prost shows (for the period 1930-1938) a more important social heterogeneity than it is generally said; the French historian demonstrates that secondary schools were frequented, at the end of the period, by 25% of different sorts of workers, employees, craftsmen and farmers; the 75% others by the bourgeoisie on one hand and the middle classes (the winners of this decade) on the other hand. However, « we are far from the democratization » (p. 87). See Prost (2016).

⁴ This term was originally not appropriated because the *Classes Nouvelles* were initially conceived as permanent; however, retrospectively, from a historical point of view, it became relevant.

2. The reform process and the questions of democratization and pupils' orientation

As the famous historian of education Antoine Prost wrote: «The theme of the unique school system [*Ecole unique*], which runs through the inter-war period, links the necessity of new structures to that of new pedagogies» (Prost, 2009)⁵.

2.1. *The Jean Zay reformist decisions and the «classes d'orientation» experience*

The victory of the Left forces in the legislative elections of 1936 April 26th and May 3th brought the «Front populaire» to power. The government led by Léon Blum was composed of SFIO (French Section of the International Labour) and Radical Party representatives. The Communist Party did not participate in the new government but supported it. As soon as it came to power, the «Front Populaire» government showed its desire to pursue an ambitious policy in the field of culture and education (Ory, 1994).

The Ministry of National Education and Fine Arts was entrusted to Jean Zay, a young lawyer (he was not yet 32 years old), journalist, one of the so-called «Jeunes-Turcs» in the Radical party (Chavardès, 1965; Loubes, 2012; Prost, 2013; Prost & Ory, 2015; Ruby, 1994). In a period of frequent ministerial changes, Jean Zay remained Minister of National Education from June 4th, 1936 to September 10th, 1939. Jean Zay tabled an ambitious project of educational reform in front of the Chamber of Deputies on March 5th, 1937. This project, which could not be realized for reasons related to the strong political external and internal opposition, implied nevertheless a particularly innovative achievement: the experience of *classes d'orientation*.

These «orientation classes» were created on an experimental basis in 45 educational establishments in October 1937. This project was a continuation of the reflections on the «Ecole unique», these classes welcoming indifferently pupils who were originally to enter secondary education, higher primary education or technical education. The rational process of educational guidance based on the individual aptitude's detection must lead, at the end of the year, to advise the pupils and families to choose the classical way (with Latin teaching), the modern one (without Latin teaching) or the vocational one.

It was therefore important for the project proponents to identify means to detect these aptitudes. Teachers were asked to carry out this mission. A traineeship organized in October 1937 for future teachers of these classes, had for primary objective to show it was important to modify the teaching practices being inspired by the principle of the New Education. It was thus a question of conceiving pedagogical situations allowing the pupils true activity, the behaviours likely to be observed, the base of the aptitude's detection process.

This experience has led to a lot of debates, sometimes very heated, between the defenders of the experience, and its resolute opponents fearing that this device might affect the quality of secondary education. The postponement of the Latin

⁵ Our translation from French (as below for all the other texts in French).

teaching three months (or more) after the start of the first year of secondary school, was one of the strong points of the controversies between 1937 and 1939.

The experiment was unfortunately stopped in September 1939, two years after its implementation, when France entered the war. However, ideas and actors were ready. The project's defenders had been able to confront their arguments, perceive the oppositions, identify lines of argumentative rupture, and understand the political, institutional and pedagogical issues associated with the experience. Thus, despite the involuntary cessation of the *classes d'orientation* experience, part of the secondary education staff was prepared to embark on a new pedagogical experiment (of which the new classes – *classes Nouvelles* – offered the opportunity after the war).

2.2. The «Commission Langevin» (1944-1947), and the role of Gustave Monod

After the war marked in France by the German Occupation and the collaborationist and reactionary government of Vichy (Paxton, 1972), the democratic reconstruction of school institution (from nursery education to University) was at the agenda. In November 1944, the Minister of Education asked Paul Langevin, a very famous professor of Physics, politically progressist, who supported new pedagogical methods, to lead a commission entrusted with a general School reform. This commission will work during three years before publishing its reformist propositions in 1947 (at that moment, it was too late, the political conditions of success having disappeared, and the Cold War begun). Among these propositions, which were never applied in their whole and remained – according to Antoine Prost (Prost, 2004) – a mythic reference during a very long time in France, several ones can be picked up, such as: the prolongation of compulsory education until 18 years old (at the time, it was officially until 14, since Jean Zay reform); the project of a common curriculum for all until 15 years of age, the necessity of a school and consequently of a professional orientation, a first school specialization between 15 and 18 years old, the call for new pedagogical methods, inspired by New Education. This plan⁶ was placed by its leaders (Paul Langevin and, after his death in 1946, Henri Wallon, a famous professor of Psychology) under the sign of social justice, and reconciliation between school and meritocracy (detection of pupil's real skills instead of their social predestination).

During its long period of working, the commission had the opportunity to make some concrete projects (Gutierrez & Kahn, 2016). It was the case as soon as 1945 with the idea to begin the transformation of the French secondary school education by creating some *classes nouvelles* at the so-called *Sixième* level⁷; the Commission wished a continual extension at the following levels (*Cinquième*, *Quatrième*, *Troisième*). Member of the commission, driving the *sous-commission du second degré*, Gustave Monod⁸ played evidently a key role in this project. He was, at the Ministry of Education, the Second-Degree Director (1944-1949), a very important

⁶ Called Langevin-Wallon plan after the death of Pr. Langevin.

⁷ First class of *collège* or *lycée* (French secondary schools)

⁸ 1885-1968.

and powerful function, just after the Minister's one. His previous career was peculiarly significant: professor of philosophy, he taught during some time (1912-1914) at *l'école des Roches*, a private innovative school situated in Verneuil-sur-Avre and based on «self-government» methods (Duval, 2009), before he taught (1923-1931) in different State high schools («lycées» in Toulon, Avignon, Tours, Marseille) and became Education Minister chief of staff (1932-1934). Heavily wounded during the First World War, he entered the Resistance during the second one, close to Paul Langevin. He was the only inspector to have been removed from office by the Vichy government because he refused the decisions against Jews. His republican and democratic commitment was combined with very profound philosophical and pedagogical convictions, testified by his former students⁹. Under his responsibility, 200 new school classes (at the *Sixième* level) were officially opened in October 1945.

Gustave Monod however did not accept to be the sole father of the «classes Nouvelles», of which – as Director of the second degree – he favored and supervised the installation. According to him, it was the collective project of the Educational Reform Commission (and specially the Secondary School Subcommittee). He pointed out that, «when it came to set the hours and the school status of these classes», Paul Langevin attached great importance to chairing the meetings himself (what shows the importance given to these classes in order to initiate a reform in longer term and what confirms the importance of collective reflection).

3. The *classes nouvelles* policy: principles, concrete reality, success and problems

3.1. General definition and organization

Monod thus defined the «classes nouvelles»: «First goal: practicing a pedagogy of orientation in an educational environment where our children can learn ways to become free» (Press Conference of 1948 December 15th «Défense de l'enseignement du Second Degré»)¹⁰.

The *Sixième nouvelle* proposed to bring into the second-degree system the methods used by New Education. As part of what this class brought, we can raise:

- small classes (maximum 25 pupils); small teachers' teams (three main teachers at the centre);
- the practice of active methods in all teaching;
- the environment study, by which the child was encouraged to discover and observe regularly the world around (it is an approach directly inspired by child-centred education according to Decroly);
- the practice of teamwork (the class was divided into groups that form freely);

⁹ See «Mon maître M. Monod», Allocution by Roger Milliex, Nicosia, 20.03. 1969, Archives Nationales françaises (AN) F/17/17 776; and Lelièvre & Nique (1990).

¹⁰ AN F/17/17 776

- the practice of manual work in order to develop the contact with the material and to allow the realization of usable objects (inspired by the John Dewey pedagogy);
- the development of artistic activities, drawing, music, rhythmic, dramatic games ...

All this constituted «test benches» (*bancs d'essais*) charged to identify pupils' abilities: «By the means of groups of 7 or 8 members, all the pupils will be observed and “tested” by their teachers in the different disciplines [above]. So, the teachers will discover, and the pupils will discover themselves their preferences and aptitudes»¹¹.

Mornings were devoted to basic disciplines, afternoons to practical and artistic activities.

Volunteer teachers were called upon to promote this new pedagogical organization. They formed a team with a leader, and they met in class council once a week (while it was once a trimester in the traditional organization). They participated to the constitution of each pupil's file: medical form, physical education form, family information sheet, school results sheet. The project was thus to introducing «science» in the pupil's orientation: according to these documents, the class council was supposed to release at the end of the school year the portrait of the child and facilitate, at time, his final orientation (this was an approach inspired by Washburne, founder of the Winnetka new school)¹². The new class aimed also to give pupils the idea of a democratic government with public services and make the peoples aware of their responsibilities (near Freinetian pedagogical and civic philosophy – Freinet, 1968).

Another task of these classes was to help the parents in orienting their children towards the branch of study best adapted to their characteristics. The number of options offered the pupils a scale of choices never known before: for example, «industrial techniques» became present in 25 % of the secondary schools; likewise, the option «economy» in 20 %. The options plastic arts, music, agriculture and so on, which were not frequent, even completely unknown, in the traditional secondary schools, appeared.

The introduction of the new classes was not easy because it took place within an established and conservative school system, with its unchanged programs and examinations. It was not easy to mobilize teachers according to pedagogical interests, in classrooms that often did not contain the necessary technical equipment, especially for manual works. It required the determination and conviction of some administrators and volunteer professors to overcome the inertia of the system and the resistance of a large part of the teachers.

New classes activists did not count their time and agreed to sit for several hours in class councils (whereas official texts limited these meetings to one hour only). In the traditional secondary schools, the «new class» could appear as «an island in the

¹¹ Official text, 1945.

¹² Carleton Washburne, product of Chicago elementary school driven by Francis Parker and John Dewey according to progressive education principles, developed the Winnetka school (Illinois) between 1919 and 1943. His activity was reflected in the so-called Winnetka Plan.

crowd of others», but the temporary pedagogical success was often linked to the combination between singularity and originality on the one hand, and no absolute break with the other classes on the other hand, playing a role of «ferment in the dough». The success also depended on the stability of the teachers' teams over several years.

3.2. *New classes: concrete examples*

Four themes are likely to give an account of the stakes attached to the concrete implementation of this experiment: accompaniment of the teams, way in which the active methods were encouraged, heightening of the emblematic discipline promoted (manual works), and, lastly, difficulties encountered by the actors of this innovation, especially in the face of other teachers (those who were defiant). We will concentrate our attention on a very famous high school «le lycée du Parc» in Lyon (the second city of France)¹³ but we also will have a glance on another place («le lycée Balzac», in Tours, Loire valley – Collectif, 2004).

3.2.1. *Accompanying the teams*

This was a very important aspect of the experiment. It was about informing, training, answering questions, encouraging, even controlling the work done. Traineeships occupied an important place in the system: they were organized for school heads, team leaders and even certain categories of teachers, especially those involved in manual works. These national groupings, which took place most of the time at the International Pedagogical Centre of Sèvres (near Paris), required a rigorous preparation within each high school. The headmaster thus relayed to the team leaders' specific questionnaires (requiring exchanges within the institution) on the functioning of classes, and educational, material, organizational difficulties encountered. The experiment was marked by numerous exchanges of letters between the headmaster, the academy authorities, the ministry, and a key-figure in Lyon (and at a national level): François Goblot, an enthusiastic partisan of the new classes. Since 1945, this teacher of philosophy was officially appointed to promoting and extending the new classes, firstly – but not only – in Lycée du Parc¹⁴. He ensured a very attentive follow-up of the experience, intervening to solving problems of personnel and organizing the educational reflection within the school. He also organized visits to the new classes (not to be confused with inspections). However, Goblot did not hesitate to express sometimes very harsh opinions concerning practices that seemed to come out of the pedagogical orthodoxy founding new classes. For example, when he visited June 12th, 1948, Mr. Dalençon's mathematics class, he noted: «On various points, the new class that I attended, is departing from the direction that we wanted to give to teaching in the new class». Goblot remarked

¹³ Archives départementales du Rhône: AD 3919 W 356 (1945-1948), and AD 3919 W 357 (1948-1952).

¹⁴ Beyond Lyon, François Goblot played officially a national role. He participated too in creating the journal *Dossiers pédagogiques pour l'enseignement du second degré*. See below.

that the teacher spent too much time in dictating, leaving too few moments for pupils' activity. He was then the guarantor of the rigorous implementation of new classes by encouraging the teacher to deepen his pedagogical reflection: «by becoming more aware of the principles of new classes and methods of activation and individualization which many mathematics teachers employ in these classes, [...] Mr. Dalençon will succeed in pushing forward his best pupils and involving almost the whole class-group»¹⁵.

3.2.2. *Encouraging active methods*

As we mentioned, the new classes were characterized by a desire for pedagogical innovation and implementation of many principles of new education and active methods. These principles were present in several texts and letters of Gustave Monod, but also, locally, of François Goblot. When teams were asked to draw up a balance sheet, the question of methods took precedence, even if traditional ones were re-endorsed in connection to the question of management and teachers' authority in the new classes (as we can read in the report drawn up by the headmaster, Mr. Bobin, in May 1949)¹⁶.

Goblot organized frequent meetings at the Lycée du Parc when discussions about pedagogical practices were necessary. In a text presumably presented during the first year of the experiment, he treated the questions related to the management and master's authority in classes where active methods were used («methods not propitious to silence and immobility»). He concluded by presenting a short questionnaire about the mathematics teaching, which, based on the topics discussed, obviously searched for stimulating reflection upon the link between the individual work and the teamwork, the concrete and the abstract work, and so on.

In Tours «Balzac» high school, the young girls perceived this concern for educational innovation too. Thus, one of them, Annick Kernet-Estève, mentioned the great change when entering the *Sixième*, and said: «In the new class, we learned to manage this change, to work in small groups, to make presentations in front of class, to know how to express ourselves and overcome our shyness» (Collectif, 2004, p. 99). Another one, Martine Arnault, spoke of «small classes, [of] a main teacher who understood our needs and who would be the link between us and the other professors, those who were interested in the experience, and eager not only to sharing their knowledge with us, but also to opening us to outside» (Collectif, 2004, p. 109). Among these remembrances of former pupils, we realize very well the pleasure in changing the pedagogical framework and in testing situations in which they were so active.

3.2.3. *An emblematic discipline: manual works*

This activity was essential: it should allow students to test activities promoting orientation (discovery of new activities revealing potential abilities). Teaching in

¹⁵ AD Rhône 3919 W 356.

¹⁶ AD Rhône 3919 W 357.

an innovative way at «Lycée du Parc» (elitist high school with traditional habits) appeared quite complicated.

As envisaged in the official texts at this time, Goblot envisioned a rapprochement between the high school and the universe of vocational education. The choice he made at Lycée du Parc was to call an assistant professor specialized in fitting and machine tools, seconded from the «Ecole des Métiers» of Lyon (vocational school). There was thus a small revolution because the two types of education had been separated and governed by different institutional logics in France for a very long time. In this context, we discern an extension of the ministerial will, which found at «lycée du Parc» a local concretization through the recruitment of this teacher.

We have also to note that at least some of the new classes allowed to go beyond the girls / boy's division, particularly marked for this teaching. In her testimony, A. Kernet-Estève, reported that besides sewing and cooking lessons, she made binding and carpentry (Collectif, 2004, p. 101).

3.2.4. *Principles confronted with local constraints*

In his assessment of May 1949, four years after the introduction of the experiment (thus with a complete curriculum from the 6th to the 3th level), the headmaster of «Lycée du Parc» regretted that teachers who were volunteer at the beginning were no longer so in September 1948: «it was increasingly more and more difficult to build the teams». Teachers of new classes were often subject to the hostility or indifference of the other teachers. So, Mr. Leclancher, one of the early teachers in the new classes, could say in 1949: «We have sometimes acted or wished to act in the heart of a great traditional high school as if it were an innovative establishment. We have achieved the maximum in an environment where 80% of our colleagues were hostile to new classes. Thus, we appeared as turbulent and cumbersome. Would you excuse our zeal, if it were exaggerated!»¹⁷. This remark undoubtedly makes us perceive some of the reasons for abandoning the experience. We read in hollow the continual and militant struggle to innovate, to invent, in the face of actors who do not wished their practices and the basies of their teaching questioned.

Such remarks are echoed in the preface that Antoine Prost wrote for the book of testimonies we have quoted about «lycée Balzac» in Tours. If the new classes were driven by an exceptional headmaster, Mrs de Saint Blanquat, and by highly invested teachers, as soon as this brilliant director left, all the reserves and grievances accumulated exploded strongly (Collectif, 2004, p. 10).

4. **Heritage and perspectives of the «classes Nouvelles»**

4.1. *New classes (1945) and orientation classes (1937) comparison*

When we analyze the foundations and characteristics of the orientation classes (1937) and that of the new classes (1945), appears a real relation of filiation, attested by the triple reference to the will to democratize the school and implement

¹⁷ AD Rhône 3919 W 357.

the principles of new education, and to base the pupils' orientation on the fine observation of their aptitudes. It is an exceptional example of an initial experience that cannot be continued and completed¹⁸ and which takes up numerous principles, ideas, practices, inspired by the previous frame, while trying to clarify, refine, adapt them. The link between these three intentions is clearly present in an official text published by the ministry on August 20th, 1945¹⁹.

This text recalls that secondary education must be a high culture teaching only addressed to «all children who are capable to reach it»; so, it initially seems to limit the expansion of this teaching, while at the same time it specifies that it should «gradually group all children and adolescents, boys and girls from twelve to eighteen old». This democratic intention immediately appears to be linked on the one hand to a reform of pedagogical conceptions, and on the other hand to the affirmation of the need for orientation based on the identification of aptitudes. Thanks to the consideration of the diversity of pupil's personalities and temperaments, it is supposed possible to «solicit all the resources of the individual beings and to give them the development that suits them». The same text adds: «It will be a matter of individualizing the methods in such conditions that no child loses his chance to become all that he can be». All these concerns seem likely to satisfy the individual, but also at the same time the society, since the device implemented must allow social life to benefit from the activity of individuals who have been able to release «their hidden strengths».

It is striking to see how close this wording is to the terms of the preface to the bill put forward by Jean Zay eight years before, on March 5th, 1937. In the 1937 text, the notion of social justice referring to the democratic ideal defended by the Popular Front Minister is particularly emphasized. In 1937 and 1945 we find the same desire to combine the democratic will and the identification of aptitudes. In this connection, we note the same ambiguity attached to this term of aptitude. There is in both cases an idea of potential, but also of limit. However, an important nuance between the two moments can be pointed out. In the 1937 text, these limits are taken in count, but with the implicit idea of a continuum on which human aptitudes are situated, everyone going more or less far on this continuum. This is the meaning of the formula: everyone will develop himself «as high as his aptitudes will allow». In the 1945 text, emphasis is placed on pedagogical diversity, with a view to considering the diversity of aptitudes. and adapting second-degree teaching to the diversity of social tasks. This is the meaning of the formula contained in the same text: «For its last purposes, second degree education is professional in the broad sense of the word». If it does not directly address pedagogical issues, the initial text of 1937 is supplemented by a series of circulars recommending the use of the active methods which must be enable, to contribute to the detection of pupil's aptitudes. There is thus a pedagogical continuity between 1937 and 1945, but the text of 1945 seems to go further in matter of pedagogical innovation by developing the basis of a more modern differentiated pedagogy.

¹⁸ Because of the war advent.

¹⁹ Official text – August 30th, 1945, Ministry of education. AD Rhône 3919 W 356. Its redactor was probably Gustave Monod himself.

Compared with previous «orientation classes» which asked the teachers to practice a psychological expertise they generally refused (Seguy, 2013, 2016), the «new classes» got involved in a pedagogical frame closer to the teachers' professional skills, to adapt to the diversity of pupils' aptitudes. As said Roger Gal²⁰, who had been an eminent member of Commission Langevin and a pedagogical innovator: «Options, like “test benches” must make possible to check the validity of the observations and to decide, by the success or failure of the pupil, whether one should continue or not the direction taken» (Gal, 1946). So, the «new classes» were clearly situated in the perspective of the pedagogical transformation of the secondary teaching required by its extension to more and more students.

4.2. *Opinions about the experiment*

As soon as the beginning (1945), a new journal was created specially to supporting the pedagogical initiative: *Dossiers pédagogiques pour l'enseignement du second degré* (Riondet, 2013). It published writings upon the experience, inquiries result and reflections coming from teachers of the new classes. A little later (1946), a specific association, ANECNES²¹, was dedicated to the new classes' promotion. All along the experiment, from 1946 to 1952, a lot of reports were written about the «classes Nouvelles»²²: from central administration itself, teachers' unions, political parties, influential figures.

It is not surprising that the reports commissioned to the «Inspectors» (very important administrators)²³ or other officials by the Second-Degree Director Gustave Monod were generally favourable. Precisely François Goblot²⁴ wrote: «The new classes have succeeded. [...] Several difficulties are explained by the aspect too limited of the reform; they will disappear with the generalization»²⁵. Nevertheless, some critical points of view were expressed in this context. Let's consider the report (39 pages) (*ibid.*) written in 1947 by Inspector Mrs. Maugendre, who visited 40 secondary schools and 70 new classes («6e» and «5e») in several districts of the French territory. She notes at the beginning that the inspection of new classes needs a special technic because it's not the individual performance of one teacher which is mainly interesting (as in usual inspections), but the work of the whole team and its global efficiency, according to the initial spirit of the reform. Her general evaluation was positive, even if she has picked up here and there some failings: for example,

²⁰ 1906-1966. He was the general secretary of GFEN, *Groupe Français d'Éducation nouvelle*, a progressive association (still existing today) struggling for active and innovative methods.

²¹ *Association nationale des éducateurs des classes nouvelles de l'enseignement secondaire*.

²² AN: F/17/17806.

²³ The administrative body of «Inspecteurs généraux», created by Napoleon 1st in 1802, and this of «Inspecteurs d'académie» were traditionally conservative, but some individualities among them could develop new original conceptions. There is no doubt that G. Monod gave a privileged place to these personalities, as Mrs Odette Brunschvicg (quoted below) who continuously promoted the New Education in her activity (see: journal *Le Surveillant général*, n° 7, 1966).

²⁴ See above.

²⁵ AN: F/17/17806.

she found in some places a very traditional and conservative teaching instead of new methods; too much teachers who were not voluntary; some difficulties to fulfill the classes and tendency to welcome only pupils with some problems (disabled, late, too pampered, etc.). She wrote: «The true new classes give an impression of «home»: their charm comes from the manner with which objects are settled, from the presence of pedagogical tools – aquarium, shelving for books, globes, printing equipment – from the exhibition of pupil's drawings on the walls ...». Mrs Maugendre made recommendations: among them, she defended the only recruitment of volunteer teachers, and she advocated the introduction of assistant teachers into the teams, as it was the case in a few schools. This inspector was favorably impressed by the quality of class councils, about which she considered these regular meetings were «spiritual sources by which teachers strengthened». She emphasized the concrete character of the works asked to the pupils. She concluded by stressing the importance of the orientation process which was the touchstone of the reform and allowed teachers «to introduce in secondary studies pupils who could fail in traditional classes».

Another report (author: inspector Mrs Brunschvig²⁶) concerned Paris and surrounds (*ibid.*). In 1946-1947, 48 schools of all sorts («écoles professionnelles», «collèges», «lycées») included new classes, (some non-mixt - boys and girls separated -, some others mixt). The general remark is that «the classes are very different and unequal, in spite of their common principle of organization». The inspector thought that the difficulties came from bad material conditions and non-volunteer teachers in certain places, and not from the reform itself. On contrary, when the context was good, the new classes «have realized all the expectations, and sometimes have exceeded them». Mrs Brunschvig made a typology of the teachers she met in these classes: the volunteers (creative, inspired, hard-working, devoted to the reform), the «rallied» (some by opportunism, others by a progressive conviction), the opponents (some of them hypocrite, dangerous for the future of the reform). She noted «The less favorable persons to the new classes are obliged to admit that the pupils of these classes are more confident and frank, that the camaraderie is better and the fraud almost unknown» (*ibid.*) According to her, children seemed happy, thanks to the reconciliation between school life and personal life. Consequently, Mrs. Brunschvig was convinced that, despite unavoidable difficulties, the new classes had a true future and were the future of the democratized secondary education.

Among the teachers' unions, the small SGEN-CFTC²⁷ (which was very involved in pedagogical matter) supported the experiment and campaigned for it, as testified an issue (1945-46) of its magazine *Ecole et Education*²⁸: «The *sixièmes nouvelles*²⁹ were born from a very democratic vision of teachers' tasks. [...] In the new classes, the teachers will carry out, as completely as possible, the function of orientation, considered as inseparable from that of teaching». This laudatory paper

²⁶ Firstly «Inspectrice d'académie» then «Inspectrice générale de l'Instruction publique».

²⁷ *Syndicat Général de l'Education nationale*, belonging to *Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Chrétiens*.

²⁸ AN: F/17/17806.

²⁹ The first school year (1945-46), only *sixièmes* were opened.

was written by Mrs. Warot (mathematics teacher at Sèvres, a famous experimental high school near Paris) who concluded by speaking of a «very daring reform».

A very influential professor, Maurice Lacroix (1893-1989), president of an association, «la Franco-Ancienne», – which worked on preserving and promoting the classical humanities (above all the Latin teaching) –, and member of a rather important teachers' union (SNES³⁰), politically at Left, had protested, from the beginning of the experiment, against the absence of Latin teaching in the *sixièmes nouvelles*, as initially planned by Monod³¹. His action was partially successful: Latin was reintroduced, but only as an option, in the second quarter of the *sixième* school year (Prost, 2009). In 1948, Lacroix wrote a report about the «classes Nouvelles», for the commission named by the official second-degree Council³². He developed a double-sided opinion. On the one hand, he recognized that the new classes were relevant by using more active methods and team work in certain disciplines; he emphasized the interest of the new organization mainly through the regular classes' councils (what was able to make a consensus between all the teachers, progressive and conservative). But in the other hand, Lacroix considered that the new pedagogy was not adapted to all the disciplines (especially Latin); he regretted a regression in diffusion of Latin language: «The experience of the new classes must not be used as a standard against Latin studies»³³. In another publication, Maurice Lacroix used a strong formula: «The enemy is not Plato or Seneca, it is the capitalistic organization of the society» (quoted by Prost, 2009, p. 117). In his report, he argued finally for a future harmonious synthesis between the «traditional» and the «new».

One of the leaders of the French communist party, Georges Cogniot, specialized in educational matter, took an ambivalent position too: the experience of the new classes was in principle approved but denounced in its social and political function. According to him, these classes were an *alibi* for the governments, because they served to mask the reality of the other classes (involving too much pupils for each) and to justify the declining intellectual level of teaching: «Is it not true that, in many cases, the intellectual education has been, more or less, discredited, and the child has been disaccustomed from the effort?» (Cogniot, 2009, pp. 119-120). Through this opinion, Cogniot, who was also – like Maurice Lacroix – a defender of Latin studies, developed a *demo-elitist* conception, that is to say on one hand a progressive and democratic vision of secondary school opened to children of all social categories, and, on the other hand, a very narrow and selective argumentation in matter of school culture and of pedagogical methods³⁴.

³⁰ *Syndicat National de l'enseignement secondaire*.

³¹ AN 71 AJ/63, Commission Langevin, séance n° 34, 1946 January 31th.

³² Published in *l'Éducation nationale*, (1948), april 22th, n°13 and reproduced in *Revue de la Franco-Ancienne* (1948) n° 86.

³³ AN: F/17/17806.

³⁴ About the concept of «demo-elitism», see Robert (2005).

4.3. *The decline and the end of the experiment*

Beginning by the *sixièmes*, the experiment grew year after year, when such innovative classes were opened in *cinquièmes* (1946), *quatrièmes* (1947), *troisièmes* (1948). Consequently, the number of these classes increased noticeably from 200 (1945) to 700 (1948), concerning 17 500 pupils³⁵. This politics was promoted as long as Monod was director of Second Degree at the Ministry (Lecoq et Lederlé, 2008)³⁶. However, the Director of Second Degree had to compose with other important actors in the Ministry, especially when it was clear that the time of a general reform of education was gone away (after 1947). For example, Aristide Beslais (1888-1973), Director of the First Degree (from 1947 to 1959), didn't share the pedagogical views of Monod and obliged him to rewrite the text of a bill project in 1949. As well shown by Antoine Savoye (Savoye, 2010), in a first version of this text, Monod said that active methods were to be used in all the classes (first and second degree together) because they were the only ones able to trigger in each discipline the pupils' initiative. After remarks and critics by Beslais, the new redaction was: «Methods to use are: 1° Traditional methods [which are the best to develop harmoniously all the pupils' faculties] 2° Active methods [which can cause pupils' initiative]», what is significant of a new priority order³⁷.

In any case, the successor of Monod, Charles Brunold (1893-1984), defended pedagogical opinions quite opposite. Differently from the members of the Commission Langevin, he was in favor of a fixist conception of the child and of a rapid selection process as he expressed in a reform project he conceived for the ministry in 1953: «A reform of education must lead every pupil to the place for which he is destined by his aptitudes, always taking inspiration from the real needs of our society. The solution of this problem appears to us in the creation, after a cycle of orientation of 2 years [...], of 2 parallel courses, one short and the other long [...]»³⁸. So, it was truly another model of organization of second-degree education, not engaged at all in the way of democratization and of the general renewing of methods.

Giving negative reactions in schools as pretext, Brunold changed radically the politics and ended the *classes Nouvelles* experiment. He proceeded in a crafty way. In an official circular (1952, May 30th), on one hand he spoke positively of «the results gained from the experience of the new classes» and announced their continuation but under a new designation: *classes pilotes* and in a severely reduced number of schools. On the other hand, he criticized the individualization of the teaching which new classes were bringing; he put forward another conception: teaching must consider the modern society, its scientific and technical progress, to determine the type of man this society needs, and to take in count this relation by watching it from a collective prospect (Savoye, *cited*).

³⁵ *Recueil de statistiques scolaires et professionnelles*, BUS, 1952, quoted by *Revue universitaire*, n° 5, 1952, nov.-dec., p. 234.

³⁶ Monod retired on 1951, October (Decree of July 9th).

³⁷ Even if the project was never applied.

³⁸ AN: F/17/17505.

The qualification of «pilot» assigned to the classes apparently maintained was significant. Instead of the previous classes, which were clearly meant for their permanent extension and for a profound reform of secondary education, the *classes pilotes* became experimental classes, enclosed in a very narrow sector. The decision taken by Charles Brunold symbolized the triumphal return of traditional methods in the whole secondary teaching.

Some parents whom children were taught in the new classes deplored the end of the initiative. Archives are holding some testimonies in this sense. For example, on July 7th, 1952, a father wrote to Mr. Labrunie (a deputy at the Parliament) to press the Prime Minister (Mr. Queuille, who was originate from this region) to maintain original pedagogy in the high school of Limoges («lycée Gay-Lussac»). In the same letter, a protest voiced by the parents was joined: «[We are] fearing that the savings waited from this modification will be done to the detriment of pupils [...] [We are] regretting that the timetable devoted to the free workings will be strongly reduced and will make the so good innovation now almost totally ineffective». Other documents from Toulon and Brest argued on the same way against the decision of Brunold. Parents and members of ANECNES from Brest were asking «insistently to maintain the *classes Nouvelles* without any modification».

Differently from the *classes Nouvelles* which were intended for transforming all the educational system, the *classes pilotes* became only a margin of this system for a time. Even if the quantitative democratization continued, the pedagogy did not change deeply and did not allow many pupils to succeed well in the secondary degree. So, in 1960, Roger Gal, quoted above, could say: «What is the advance of New Education? The Langevin project, the new classes of the second degree, were almost close to formalize the new methods» (*Pour l'ère nouvelle*, 1960, n° 19, 2nd quarter). Only close to ...

5. Conclusion

Beyond the description and analysis of the *Classes nouvelles* experiment, what is given us in this study feeds the reflection on the modes of constitution of the educational reforms, and on the resistances that they can raise. This is, like other studies (Prost, 2013; Poucet & Prost, 2016; Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Seguy, 2019), to understand the factors of success and failure of reforms in the school field.

We propose to consider the history of educational reforms by using the notion of «moment». These «moments» where the reform seems possible, would be characterized by the conjunction of favorable factors: an opened mindedness, a favorable political configuration, and one or two strong personalities carrying the project.

The reform of the new classes was part of such a moment. There was truly an opened mindedness, heir to the «Ecole unique» movement, emblematic of the will to democratize, to practice pupils' orientation, and to implement new education and active methods. The partial affiliation between «orientation classes» (1937) and «new classes» (1945), we have noted, illustrates the possible impact of previous projects on mentalities evolution. The «orientation classes» experience showed that it was possible to work on aptitudes and orientation, to consider teamwork, to transform

the second-degree pedagogical practices. In 1945, the political configuration was favorable. The day after the Second World War was conducive to certain social concord that could be translated into the implementation of ambitious projects (like, in education, Langevin-Wallon plan).

The political ambition in favor of the school reform involved appreciable consequences: important financial efforts were implemented (such as the reduction to 25 pupils by each new class), what was a very serious commitment. Last significant element: the reform project had to be personalized. Holder of a relative but effective power, Gustave Monod played this role. Having already had an important place in the «orientation classes» experience, he was the main initiator and advocate of the new classes, knowing how to surround himself with other notable activists, such as Roger Gal or François Goblot.

This moment was also characterized by its coherence (democratization, orientation, active methods). So, Monod, Gal, Goblot and others were determined to rapidly extend the initiative to the whole educational system. As said Monod in a very flowery style: «We will introduce this *nouvelle sixième* in our old university garden as a young perennial plant, which will progressively – we are sure – grow over all the flowerbeds, and even over some wastelands that the prejudices or neglect of gardeners have so far abandoned»³⁹.

The reform process linked to this combination of favorable factors is however reversed when one of the factors is questioned. The phenomenon could be accentuated when all the factors are swept away by the political stakes. That's what happened in the early 1950s. The mood changed. The educational effervescence of the day after war noticeably decreased. The Langevin-Wallon plan was made public in 1947 but did not give rise to achievements. The political context of the new Fourth Republic was difficult, with frequent ministerial changes. From 1947 to 1951, five ministers of education succeeded each other (Lecoq et Lederlé, 2008). Finally, the essential actor of the new classes, Gustave Monod, retiring in 1951, made way, as mentioned above, for a successor, Brunold, clearly unfavorable to the new classes. In such a context, points of contention, previously set aside, reappeared and further strengthened a rejection mechanism. The main point of contention was on pedagogical practices and on the design of secondary education. From this last point of view, the Latin teaching was a major element of confrontation: the militants for whom the important point was the pupils' activity and not the Latin question opposed the advocates of a traditional pedagogy, considering that the excellence had to result from a slow impregnation, necessarily based on education through the classical humanities. At the beginning of the 1950s, there was undoubtedly an irreducible incompatibility between the «grammar» of a system based on the traditional model (according to Tyack and Tobin terminology), and an innovative conception questioning the hierarchy of knowledge, the organization of the teaching, and especially the place of the teacher in this device. Particularly, the notion of teacher's authority was at stake. While, as shown in the new classes of «lycée Balzac» in Tours, the classroom ambiance and a conception of teacher's authority negotiated and not imposed top to bottom, were appreciated by some pupils in some

³⁹ Official text – August 20th, 1945, Ministry of education, *quoted above*.

(not all) situations (Prost, 2007). In the official text of 1945 august 20th, we can read that the classroom has to be considered as «a small democracy in miniature», the management of the group having to be entrusted to the pupils themselves. Such a recommendation indisposed a majority of teachers used to their traditional authority (however, these practices were not implemented in all the new classes as many reports revealed). If the decision to abandon the new classes was taken by the policymakers, it was because most of the teachers were not ready. As mentioned by Tyack and Tobin: «Changing basic organizational patterns created a significant cognitive and emotional strain for teachers» (1994, p. 478).

Does this mean that any reform is impossible in the education world? Of course not. Many ambitious reforms have emerged. What should be noted is that, even when they are abandoned, the reform projects leave traces, in the texts, in the mentalities, and that they can reappear, sometimes in a very weakened way, or largely transformed. So, the French educational system has been trying to renovate itself since the end of the Second World War, drawing inspiration from the conceptions of new education, even if these borrowings are mostly reflected in an impoverishment of initial ideas (Robert, 2006). Educational reform may be at this price, situated in a complex set of gradual adjustments based on the «step by step» principle.

6. References

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