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How do education professionals cooperate to tackle early school leaving

The French national plan against early school leaving, which was launched at the start of the school year in 2014, is intended, among other things, to strengthen collaboration between education professionals in order to make headway in preventing the phenomenon. The experience of the groups for the prevention of early school leaving shows how headteachers have sought to tackle this issue of national concern and how the idea of collaborative work is taking a variety of forms at the level of the individual school.

teaching and learning
prevention teachers
head teachers
early school leaving
prevention group
collaboration

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The increased attention the French Ministry of Education has been paying since the end of the last decade to the problem of early school leaving has recently been focused on prevention. Thus the national plan for combatting early school leaving, introduced at the start of the new school year in 2014, provided for the establishment in all secondary schools of groups specifically dedicated to its prevention. The idea was to bring together all the various actors in the educational community, including school management teams, teaching and pastoral staff and representatives of the social and health services. Collaboration between these various professional groups is regarded by the Ministry as a guarantee of effectiveness in analysing the risks of early school leaving and devising solutions. However, beyond a declaration of the overall objective, central government has not set out in any detail how the groups are to be constituted; in particular, it has not spelled out the place of teachers in them nor how they are to operate.

A survey of management teams in more than 120 schools (cf. box on methodology) has shown that the collaborative work is organised in a wide diversity of ways; these differences in practices and modes of organisation are

presented here in the form of a typology. In the first type identified, the prevention effort involves a limited number of people and is based on a narrow concept of absenteeism. In the second, a broader perspective is adopted and a larger number of staff are involved, although teachers are still not included. In the third type, teachers are included in the prevention group and pedagogical considerations play a part in its deliberations and practices. In the fourth, the group is very broadly based and its approach to prevention takes a wide range of aspects into account. These four models shed light on the way in which school principals interpret a national framework and translate it to the local level. More broadly, they show that the Ministry's views on promoting collaborative work are leading to a re-examination of schools' internal operations.

Narrowly based collaboration focused on dealing with early school leavers

This first type represents 28% of the schools surveyed. They include both vocational and general high schools (*lycées*) and lower secondary schools (*collèges*). The effort to



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- prevent early school leaving involves a small number of staff within the schools and is focused mainly on dealing with the urgency of individual situations.

Translators' note:

* It is a specificity of French education that the pastoral care of students in secondary schools is not the sole responsibility of teachers but is assigned largely to specialised, mainly non-teaching staff that have the dual task of looking after and managing students. Such a division of labour is virtually unheard of in the UK, where teachers are responsible for both their students' academic progress and their pastoral care

**The *conseiller principal d'éducation*, hereinafter referred to as the CPE, is the senior non-teaching member of a French secondary school's staff after the principal. He/she is responsible for pupil supervision and discipline, absenteeism etc. There is no real equivalent position in schools in Anglophone countries, hence the lack of translation.

In this type, the prevention effort is institutionalised in the 'prevention group' at a number of very different levels. At best, the group has an autonomous existence and a regular meeting time; otherwise, it forms part of the management team's weekly meeting. In some, admittedly rare cases, it does not exist at all.

The collaboration is basically organised around the pastoral staff*, since absenteeism is the key indicator of a likely early exit from education. The *conseiller principal d'éducation* (CPE)** consolidates the bulk of the information and is responsible for circulating it, both horizontally (to the other professionals in the school) and vertically (to the management team).

The prevention group is concerned as a matter of priority with cases of 'serious' absenteeism in which pupils are already on their way out of the school. Its role in these problematic cases is to smooth their exit from the school as far as possible. In this approach, a school's teaching staff are scarcely involved at all in monitoring pupils and are seldom members of the prevention group. Their role is confined to providing information on the cases identified when requested to do so by the school administration, the CPE or the management team.

The limited scope of the prevention effort is above all a reflection of the fact that the management teams in the schools concerned do not regard early school leaving as truly worrying. In their view, it results from a pupil's lack of investment in his or her education or an inappropriate choice of course. And yet one in every three of the head teachers in this group believes that their pupils are experiencing significant difficulties at school and that earlier leaving is a reality. However, few arrangements or specific measures have been put in place to deal with these difficulties. The collaborative work is regarded

as useful but no particular arrangements have been introduced to encourage it.

Structured, collaborative preventive effort - but without teachers

For schools in this category (18% of the total), the question of early school leaving is regarded as 'inescapable' and a priority. Most of them are vocational high schools and many are located in suburban areas; their pupils labour under a number of social and educational difficulties. The head teachers tend to have an holistic view of the phenomenon. They talk of adolescence as a 'specific period' and of their pupils' 'distress', which leads them in turn to ask questions about the responsibility of the education system in general and the running of their own schools in particular. The management teams express a desire to see changes in the way pupils are viewed, in school climate and culture and in educational justice.

Policies on dealing with early school leaving have generally been in place in these schools for many years. They involve a large number of measures, specific classes, projects and experiments aimed both at prevention and intervention (sport-based 'fresh start' or re-engagement groups, arrangements for one-to-one guidance between a pupil and an adult of his or her choice within the school, academic support provided by a partner association etc.). They may also include measures designed to widen pupils' cultural horizons or develop their civic engagement (international exchanges, workshops on gender equality, cultural projects).

These numerous measures require collaboration between members of the educational community and actors outside the school. Nevertheless, the forms this collaboration takes vary somewhat from one school to the next and the mere existence of such partnerships is not in itself any guarantee that all the actors within the school will be involved. Teachers do indeed contribute to certain collaborative measures, but this does not apply across the board and their involvement is still very much a matter of individual initiative.

In these schools, membership of the prevention groups is usually limited to the management team, representatives of the pastoral staff and health and social workers. Like their counterparts in the first type of school, prevention group members in these schools are concerned to tackle cases of absenteeism; however, they are also interested in broader issues, such as the 'malaise' affecting pupils in a particular class, health etc. The head teachers want the prevention groups to be effective and reactive

The TITA project

These analyses were carried out as part of the European TITA (*Training, Innovative Tools and Actions*) project, which is funded with the support of the European Commission and being carried out in France, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Spain, Slovenia and Hungary.

The aim of the project is to promote collaborative, multi-professional working in the fight against early school leaving. It comprises specific national action programmes and a series of training programmes to be put into effect in all the countries involved. For a period of three years between 2014 and 2017, Céreq will observe and analyse collaborative practices in France, Luxembourg and Switzerland and, in the last year, evaluate a training tool produced as part of the project.

www.titaproject.eu

but do not envisage any major changes in their composition or operations. Thus they have no intention of inviting teachers to join the group, since in their view the role of teachers is to be involved in the general measures being taken rather than to deal with individual cases, which are the prevention group's responsibility. While they have no institutionalised voice within the prevention groups, teachers are not kept in the dark about the groups' activities and are often informed about the decisions they take. This is also explained by the fact that the prevention groups' work in these schools is fully professional, with regular reports on their activities, specific monitoring tools, etc.

A broader approach to prevention, with teacher involvement

This third type represents 36% of the schools surveyed; the majority are vocational or general high schools rather than lower secondary schools. The management teams here say that, while early school leaving is not very high in their schools, they nevertheless regard it as an important issue. The head teachers of these schools are keen for teaching practices to change, with a greater focus on preventing early school leaving. This desire for change perhaps reflects their longstanding involvement in working groups and task forces on the fight against early school leaving. They have experimented with alternative approaches to teaching and learning: competence-based assessment, teaching partnerships between upper and lower secondary teachers as a means of forestalling early school leaving, dedicated time slots for discussions between teachers, etc.

These management teams interpret the prevention groups' mission in various ambitious ways. Some have proposed changes to their composition and management in order to integrate them fully and permanently into their school's organisational structure, by making them official school bodies, for example, or by including pupils' families as members.

The prevention groups in these schools differ in form from those in the other categories because they have been opened up to teaching staff. In some cases, teachers participate directly in the group. In others, they are represented by the CPE, who reports on their observations after having gathered them during formal interviews held on a regular basis. In yet other cases, the head teachers expressed a desire to incorporate them into the group quickly.

While the prevention groups in the previous categories focus essentially on absenteeism as an indication of early school leaving, those in

Methodology

The information was gathered between November 2014 and June 2015 in the three regional education authorities taking part in the TITA project in France, namely Aix-Marseille, Créteil and Lyon. Céreq assembled a random sample of 155 schools representing all types of secondary education. From this sample, twelve were selected for interviews. Members of the management teams were questioned about their career trajectories, their views on the school and on early school leaving, the policies they were developing to combat it and their vision of collaborative working.

Within this framework, the prevention groups set up under the terms of the national plan were the main focus of the questioning; however, all the multi-professional prevention groups, regardless of their designation, form or composition, were also taken into account.

Analysis of the interviews led to the identification of the variables to be used in the subsequent statistical analysis. The observations presented here are based on a combination of the analysis of the 24 interviews with management teams and the responses to the questionnaires sent out to head teachers, 123 of which were returned out of 155 sent out. The typology developed from the questionnaires is based on a multiple correspondence analysis, which was followed by an ascending hierarchical classification.

this category are also concerned with the pupils still attending school but showing little interest in their education. Thus the task of identifying potential early school leavers becomes much broader in scope, since it covers all pupils and involves all the school staff. In this approach, prevention is no longer confined to simply monitoring pupils.

It might be assumed that prevention groups in this type will gradually see their practices change. After all, the head teachers have questioned the effectiveness of their own arrangements (including the prevention groups themselves) and want to reform them. In particular, they want teachers to be integrated as far as possible into the prevention groups in order that they can get a fuller picture of their pupils and adapt their teaching accordingly.

These teams are more likely than the others to state that they have changed their practices since the national plan to fight early school leaving was launched in the autumn of 2014. Nevertheless, some of them continue to emphasise the difficulty of involving teachers in the collaborative work on a long-term basis.

Involving the whole of the school community

Lower secondary schools account for the greater part of this type, which represents 18% of the schools surveyed. Vocational high schools are underrepresented. This can probably be explained by the fact that policies on tackling early school leaving were initially developed with a view to enforcing the statutory minimum school leaving age, which applies primarily to lower secondary school pupils. ●●●



*National Plan
Against Early
School Leaving,
presentation file for
consultation on the
Ministry of
Education's
website. (in French)*

www.education.gouv.fr

●●● The prevention effort in one typical lower secondary school revolves around the twin goals of success and perseverance. It brings into play issues related not only to teaching and learning, and education more generally, but also to parental involvement. Longstanding individual initiatives on teaching and learning have now developed into a coherent and collective system of practices that includes help with homework and workshops on reading, writing and 'methodology' held throughout the first year of lower secondary school. This system is sufficiently well structured to survive any changes that might occur in the composition of the management team.

The prevention effort in this school takes a very particular form. Instead of there being one group covering all pupils, here there is a group for each class. A core set of actors is common to all these groups (head teacher, CPE, social worker, nurse and careers adviser), with the form tutor of the class in question being added to each individual group. Each form tutor has a pre-planned time slot dedicated to meetings of this group.

This new configuration has led to an upheaval of roles within the prevention groups. Previously, the CPE was the group linchpin, responsible for gathering and circulating the required information; now it is the form tutor who is the key professional in these exchanges of information. Consequently, children experiencing difficulties with their education are a key issue for the group, on the same level as social or health problems. The management team believes that, as a result of their membership of the group, teaching staff will become permanently involved in the task of identifying pupils in difficulty. Although the prevention group is only one part of a whole set of arrangements based on collaboration between the various professional groups within the school, the school management sees it as an opportunity to formalise this type of practice and place it on a permanent footing. Respondents to the questionnaire did, after all, emphasise that such collaborative work is never fully established or accepted.

This collaborative, multi-professional approach to the prevention of early school leaving concerned represents a synthesis of various elements, including management teams' perceptions of early school leaving, their conceptualisation of the education system and their assessment of their own schools and their capacity for developing as collective organisations. A 'head teacher' effect also seems to come into play above and beyond the school effect. There is far from a unified approach to the issue of early school leaving. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that there is a fair degree of latitude in interpreting what constitutes 'prevention' and even greater room for manoeuvre when it comes to implementing a multi-professional action plan designed to achieve it.

Thus the approaches to prevention can be divided into two categories. In the first, existing practices are minimally extended and focused mainly on dealing with individual cases. The second is characterised by a drive to mobilise teachers and other professional groups around a much broader concept of prevention.

Thus the involvement of teachers is a key issue in multi-professional collaboration. School management teams have, after all, traditionally been the main players in individual schools in the fight against early leaving, working in a team made up of the CPE and representatives of the schools' social and health services. This group does not simply provide a framework for problem resolution; it also produces a discourse on the school and opinions on its internal functioning. As such, it asks questions of the teaching community and its practices. This is why prevention groups that include teachers among their members may provide a framework for producing a shared vision of what individual schools want and are able to do. Although not all head teachers share this view, it is clear that some of them have already interpreted the plan to combat early school leaving, the prevention group and 'multi-professional' practices as a principle for managing and developing work groups.

Further reading

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