Grading character education in France: a means of changing and evaluating student behaviour?

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Abstract

For several years, the French authorities have been concerned about the overall climate at school and the increase in incivility in the school environment. The 2005 framework law proposed a pedagogical and educational innovation: the character education grade. This grade not only assesses the attitude and involvement of the students in their establishments but also their behaviours. This article examines junior high school students' perception of the character education grade in France to see whether it is conducive to the learning of civic and social competences. For this purpose, we rely on the analysis of institutional prescriptions, scientific reports and on-going research work including the accounts of ninety-six junior high school students. Based on this qualitative research, we first focus on the context within which the character education grade appeared and the goals it aimed to serve; then, through the the official prescriptions with the students' views to see how this new measure was comprehended by the students in the course of their education. The first results are marked by scepticism towards the actual reach of this character education grade.

Keywords: competences, evaluation, education, justice principle, strategy, conformity

1. A few contextual elements for the character education grade

1.1 Incivility, a recurring phenomenon

For several years, European countries have been confronted with recurring political, economic and social difficulties. The increase in individualistic behaviours, the toughening of behaviours, professional uncertainty and persistent unemployment have often led to the creation of a climate of insecurity, or even increased violence in human relations. The deteriorated contexts aren't without impact on the population, especially the younger generations in educational establishments. In a society where one has to find a place for oneself, civic values are often questioned, and this as early as while the children are in school. Indeed, more or less pronounced tensions are present, notably in junior high schools, and in particular in underprivileged areas. Faced with this phenomenon, the schools intend to develop tools to curb it and educate the adolescents. The 1990s were marked by the will on the political authorities' part to focus their work, at first, on the students' involvement in school life (development of student representatives, councils, associations, etc.). However, hardly any change in behaviour was observed. The question of violence became a societal question at large. Faced with media exposure of serious events (violent acts falling within the competence of criminal

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law), increased incivility on school grounds and the joint concern of students and their parents, the authorities proposed new measures to comprehend the phenomenon. Between 1990 and 2000, successive governments sought to measure its extent and to understand its causes, through censuses (Tallon, 1990), European observatories on violence in schools (1998, directed by Debardieux) and various tools (SIGNA census software, 2001; plan to fight against violence, 2006; SIVIS census software, 2007) in order to have at their disposal an information system for the monitoring of security-related events at school (typology, frequency, evaluation and identification). These census and self-diagnosing tools were and are still mostly considered as allowing for a possible reflection on the schools' climate and its evolution, from a preventive standpoint.

Given the mixed results of the lasting establishment of a serene atmosphere and of the education of the students in terms of social awareness and responsibility, the authorities proposed the implementation of the character education grade.

1.2 A pedagogical and educational innovation: the character education grade

The 2005 framework law set itself three goals: that the Republic's values be better respected; that the schools and the instruction programs be better organized; and that the educational system be better managed. Within this framework, the character education grading appeared. This grade is partly based on the core curriculum, which defines the contents and goals to achieve in terms of knowledge during the mandatory schooling period, which lasts until the age of 16 (junior high school level). The mastering of this curriculum rests on seven main competences. Five of them fall under discipline-specific learning (mastering French, information technologies, etc.), two fall under social and civic competences as well as the students' autonomy and sense of initiative. This approach is singular in that this grade appraises for the first time not only the students' attitude and engagement in their schools but also their behaviour.

With this will to educate students as citizens, we seek to explore the meaning of the character education grade as a measure. To what extent does it contribute to the acquisition of civic and social skills? How does it allow the student to take initiatives and be responsible?

Our assumption is that the character education grade, in its foundation, relates to a paradoxical logic between obedience and submission on the one hand, and emancipation and participation on the other. We share the notion that this new practice promotes adolescents' social conformity rather than an increased sense of responsibility on their part. Furthermore, its evaluative dimension alters its very meaning (Castoriadis, 1975) and constitutes, as far as we are concerned, an additional means to reinforce discipline and promote social peace within the school environment. To test our assumption, we proceeded in two stages: an analysis of the measure, and a collection of empirical data.

2. Research methodology

Our approach started through the studying of official guidelines, the exploration of the measure itself, in its foundation and educational purpose. Then, a survey through questionnaires was conducted with ninety-six junior high school students (ninth-graders in one school located in the center of a city of 300,000 inhabitants in Western France). The fifty-seven questionnaires actually completed and returned were analyzed (Mucchelli, 1991; Bardin, 2007) and gave us the group's overall vision, while also highlighting how they viewed the character education grade as a life experience in their school education. As a follow-up to this survey, ten junior high school students agreed to participate in a qualitative study through semi-structured interviews allowing for a finer understanding of their comments. This approach enabled us to faithfully collect the expressed views around the character education grade as a practice. The 15 year old students were thus given the opportunity to voice their opinions, beliefs and ideas with greater freedom. The manifest content of their discourse (Bakhtin, 1981) was fueled by the emotional tensions induced by the latent content. This method was essential given the nature of the sample researched. The adolescents were spontaneous and critical in regard to the character education grade. Our interviews revolved around three main themes: the representations of the character education grade, its benefits and purposes, and finally the possible long-term alternatives to help adolescents build their identity as a person and a citizen.

These accounts were compared to the character education grade as an institutional measure[1], with the intention, between its national prescription and its actual implementation, to shed some light on the benefits, the difficulties, the contradictions and the adverse effects of such a measure. The purpose of this comprehensive approach (Weber, 1976/1983) is to analyze subjective experiences as lived in a school environment in order to open paths of reflection on the issue at stakes as well as its impact.

Can banking on providing an education to citizenship through the evaluation of behaviours and engagement really help the students construct their identity and raise their awareness as to the active role they may and will play in society?

3. Results

3.1 Foundation and meaning of a singular approach: the character education grade

3.1.1 An ambitious project

Faced with the increase of incivility in schools, the character education grade raises the question of discipline, as well as how it is handled. The 2005 framework law specifies that: '[…] the Nation defines as the school's primary mission the sharing by all the students of the values of the Republic…'[2] In this respect, the character education grade aims to assess the acquisition of the sixth and seventh skills of the common curriculum

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[1] CIRCULAR N°2006-105 of June 23, 2006 pertaining to life at school and the character education grade.
[2] Article 2 of the April 23, 2005 framework law and program for the future of school.

concerning the various aspects of the students' engagement and education as citizens. 'The character education grade is an integral part of this educational approach […]. It contributes, in that it gives a reference point to the students, to the development of a connection between school, life at school and life in society' – a vast and ambitious program, indeed 'excessively idealistic' according to some critics (Mamou, 2006). In fact, two main reasons lead us to question the realism of such a measure: taking into account the French educational system and the public it is in fact aimed at.

Historically, we know it has been difficult for the French school system to take into account non-cognitive skills in the students' overall school education. Indeed, the French school system has remained, in its form (Vincent, 2004), exclusively focused on discipline-specific knowledge even if since 2005 secondary education has extended its efforts to associate what the aborted 1947 Langevin-Wallon plan had then called 'intellectual education and the daily practice of a social experience' (Langevin-Wallon, 1947, in Mialaret, p. 62). The French school system has always separated what falls under noble disciplines (mathematics, French, History, etc.) that can be assessed and eventually lead to the awarding of diplomas, from social manners and know-how in relation to the construction of the self. However, while the 2005 law aims to change the approach to knowledge through competences and the *education to* (investigative fields close to the students' social concerns combining knowledge, values, behaviours and references practices), taking into account social experience still remains a peripheral concern. Thus kept in the background, attitudes and behaviours have always been considered as a form of knowledge acquired prior to schooling, within the family sphere. One can therefore question the ability of such a measure to aim to transform adolescents when it hasn't culturally been an integral part of the history of schooling. In addition, one ought to take into account the adolescent population targeted here, as it is going through a period of contentious states (Coslin, 2002). Between conformity and differentiation, adolescents operate according to various modes and their relationship with adults is often expressed in terms of power struggle. The students express themselves in ways ranging *between unruliness and the construction of the self*, (Hintermeyer, 2008). Faced with these varying behaviours and with a concern for self-construction, the character education grade is based on contents that serve multiple or even, at times, contradictory purposes.

3.1.2 *The character education grade: a project serving multiple or even contradictory purposes*

The character education grade is based on four main criteria that aim to share values and develop an education in civility as well as responsible and civic behaviours:

- Attendance: the students must attend the classes inherent to their schooling;
- Respecting the rules and regulations that govern the school and prescribe a number of obligations;
- Participating in school life and in activities organized and recognized by the school (activities with the elderly or with disabled people, activities against discrimination or aiming to promote sustainable development…);

- Obtaining the road and traffic safety certificate as well as the first aid certificate.

We observe, in this breakdown, a pedagogical novelty: the participation and validation of a form of involvement resting on values such as the respect of the environment, solidarity, and responsibility. This point contrasts with the other three, which rest on norms and standards (rules, duties, obligations) rather than values. The other three criteria imply more characteristically *prescriptive* (what must or mustn't be done), *evaluative* (what it is right to do) and *descriptive* (way of doing things) aspects representing the norm (Canto-Sperber, 2010, p. 1357). In this determinist approach, we could surmise that the character education grade consists of a set of major imperatives that have to be complied with. We can also analyze this grade as a reference model towards action (Weber, 1976/1983) allowing for the measurement of the gaps between the students' behaviours and an established norm, aiming to regulate rather than reprove. Given the diversity in the possible interpretations, how can the character education grade be defined: as a way of regulating conflicts, of punishing, or reproving? Or as an actual tool to promote the construction of the self? The evaluation of the character education grade seems to give a direction to this debate.

3.1.3 The evaluation of the character education grade

Evaluating or speaking of evaluation amounts to speaking of norms and various forms of excellence in the wish to achieve what is best for oneself (Perrenoud, 1995). These meanings invite us to consider the evaluation from two standpoints: one in connection with rules of conduct (laws, rules, regulations), or in other terms a degree of conformity or deviance (Becker, 1985), the other in connection with excellence norms (effort, engagement), or in other terms a degree of mastering accomplishments and improvements (Perrenoud, 1995). The evaluation of the character education grade thus constitutes a measurement in a specific moment in the course of the student's schooling. It always implies a normative aspect, the question here being whether this norm is meant to reprove or to guide.

From an institutional standpoint, the character education grade aims to be formative and gratifying. 'It is meant to promote attitudes that are positive towards school and towards others. Like any other form of grading, it evaluates the progress made by the student during the school year.'[3] It is presented as beneficial and consensual (Potier, 2010): 'The principal collects, on the one hand, the proposal of the home room teacher after the latter has consulted all the members of the class's pedagogical team, and on the other hand the opinion of the school's chief supervisor.'[4]

This approach attempts to interlock disciplinary knowledge (maths, languages, etc.) and social behaviours (Gasparini, 2013) for 'the obtention of the national certificate of

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[3] CIRCULAR N°2006-105 of June 23, 2006 pertaining to life at school and the character education grade.
[4] The chief supervisor is the person in charge of the students outside of the classroom.

general education' (2006). But upon closer inspection, this evaluation through the character education grade is a summative (a grade from 0 to 20) rather than formative (advice, support for the student) assessment. At least ten points are granted to conformity with the rules, if not more (the variation in points is vague concerning the last two criteria on which the grade is based) and very few extracurricular areas and activities are developed outside of the classroom in the school.

The character education grade oscillates between two orientations: a social experience – and the socializing pervasion of its contents – and its evaluation. How, then, is the character education grade implemented in the schools? Rachel Gasparini (2013) underlines, in this respect, the professional tensions connected with the supervision of the measure and the difficulties in reaching an agreement (Callon, Latour, 1991) to implement it. The context within which the schools function (center of the city or underprivileged areas, etc.) and the educational sensibilities of the teachers, principals and chief supervisors give rise to multiple interpretations and implementations. What meaning, hence, can it be given? The character education grade then takes on a different meaning depending on the various schools' logic and context.

Beyond the analysis of the measure itself, which unveils strong tensions, we sought, for this article, to glean the students' own experience as well as their critical assessment. What is their perception of the character education grade? Do they share the idea that it is a formative tool for the construction of their identity or do they see it on the contrary as an attempt on the institution's part to gain control over their behaviour?

3.2 Junior high school students and the character education grade

The results of the survey highlight four main themes: the students' perception of this measure, its impact, its flaws and the possible alternatives.

3.2.1 Norm as a definition and use of the character education grade

The character education grade is mostly perceived as a grade focusing on behaviours and in particular on deviant behaviours (Merton, 1939/1997). It measures the gap between the student's personal behaviour and the rules established by the school. In that sense, its goal is to strongly reprove and correct personal conduct: 'It is yet another grade, supposed to tone down our behaviour,' frankly explained Antoine, a ninth-grader. This comment is rather representative of the students that were interviewed in relation to the norm. With this, the students imply the ('supposed') regulating or deregulating effects of such a measure. It is clearly underlined that integrating an image of oneself as it is mirrored by someone else may very well trigger the reverse reaction: either it curbs the students' behaviour or, in opposition, prompts them to repeat their actions. 'If they let us get away with it, we just keep on going,' added Hugo, another ninth-grader. Based on the students' profiles, the impact of this grade seems to differ.

3.2.2 The character education grade: a variable impact

The various accounts we collected allowed us to identify three main attitudes with regards to the character education grade: indifference, pseudo-indifference, and strategy. Indifference concerns the extreme profiles at opposite ends of the spectrum, i.e. the best as well as the weakest students. If we refer to the sociological classification by F. Dubet (1991), 'real students', moreover the very good students have acquired the codes of schooling even before starting their school education thanks to their families. 'In the behaviours, there is something in the student that comes from the way he/she has been brought up from a young age […], he/she is used to what should and shouldn't be done.' Consequently, this grade varies little in relation to the other grades acquired in connection with other knowledge areas. The same is true for the students encountering difficulties, who accumulate behavioural lapses and bad grades. The character education grade is seen as 'just another grade' that won't in any case change the course of their education. Its non-determining aspect minimizes its impact and deters students from behaving any differently.

The pseudo-indifferent category concerns more specifically students that we may call 'average'. Neither excellent nor particularly behind, they follow the course of their studies to keep their heads above water, providing the minimum of effort in their behaviour as well as their school work. 'I watch out… I'm not a whiz but if I want to go on to the next grade, I know very well that the teachers and the chief supervisor are going to have a close look at my attitude, so even though I know it won't really change anything, I'm careful. I may have a better chance of making it if I stay off their radar…' Martin, a ninth-grader told us. Artificial as this grade may be, we can suppose that it serves as an index of behaviour. This is true for the students who have a "strategic" approach to it and who, not very imaginative yet 'formatted' to the functioning of the school, adjust their behaviour accordingly. In their cases, however, the grade remains important, in that this category of students is aware of the fact that it plays a role in their average (a grade report includes approximately ten subjects, including the character education grade) just as all the other disciplines do. 'It can lower my average by one point when the grade is very low, or half a point […], I know what I'm talking about! So, a few days before the trimester's teachers' meeting, I keep a low profile,' confessed François, another ninth-grader.

The types of adolescents belonging to this profile are attached to grades and have fully integrated their jobs as students (Perrenoud, 1995). They know how to decipher the institution's expectations and seek to be well considered, an art according to P. Merle (2002). Actual skills are then deployed: some to learn in order to succeed, and others to learn how to succeed. In the latter, the students maneuver, and play with appearances to get the best out of the situation – they adjust themselves to those who decide on this specific grade. Can we really talk, here, about learning values or training to become a citizen, when cunning and manipulation become the reference points?

These highly differing strategies underline the degree of integration of the concept on the adolescents' part, and the nature of their relation with the school. As Marie, a ninth-grader, aptly commented: 'Either you've figured out that only grades count and you do as you're told, or you're done for and the character education grade won't change

anything […], it's true that it depends on us, but not only.' There is, behind such talk, confusion between school work and behaviour.

3.2.3 The character education grade questions the adults' responsibility

While the students do not minimize their own role in developing a mindful, autonomous and responsible attitude, they nevertheless expect to be guided in this experience. They are rather critical towards the adults who supervise them: 'They make various observations and we expect a punishment that never comes […]. If there was a strict application of the penalties that the adults want to apply, it would change the whole deal. Even if upbringing starts when you're very little, we expect more authority from the school supervisors too,' argued Raphael, a ninth-grader as well. 'In any case, if we do something stupid, we still get a 16 or 17 out of 20 and whatever happens outside of the classroom doesn't count,' added Thomas.

With their criticism, the adolescents show that they need reference points and frameworks to construct their identity. Yet the solutions proposed by the schools and the people in charge of accompanying them maintain them in various dichotomies: obey/disobey; boundaries/freedom, etc.

In any case, nothing is discussed or co-constructed in the teacher-student relationship. This is the reason why students put its impact into perspective and propose other alternatives.

3.2.4 Alternatives to the character education grade

Most of the interviewed adolescents postpone the construction of their identity and autonomy to a later period (high school); a few of them put forward the idea of their involvement in their sports club as a form of time given to others (refereeing, supervising). Yet, they also acknowledge that it isn't an innate undertaking on their part. These proposals mostly apply to student profiles that are good, or even very good, in school and have a regular social and extra-curricular activity outside of school. However, they are very attached to receiving compensation in consideration of their efforts. 'We need some kind of reward, not necessarily a grade […] but something to distinguish us… I don't know how…' The adolescents expect to be recognized as a person but haven't yet taken the extra step towards the notion of engaging oneself for free. Most evoke a lack of maturity that will be worked out over time.

Conclusion

Since this study was conducted, the tension concerning the character education grade and its limited impact have led the authorities to suppress this pedagogical innovation. For want of a consensus this character education grade has not fond its place in French schools, which are still quite marked by a discipline-centered organization (knowledge above all). Our study, however, highlighted in its very definition the paradoxes of a

measure that oscillated between autonomy and obedience, prescription and autonomization. The students quickly identified its flaws and this led them to focus on building strategic skills rather than civic qualities. In this kind of socialization process, we tend to end up with increased social control through the integration of norms and standards (Durkheim, 1924) rather than a true reflection on oneself and one's own actions, an aspect that the interviewed students readily spotted.

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