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BEHIND THE POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION IN FRENCH COMMUNITY OF BELGIUM: CENTRAL CRITERIA VS. LOCAL ACTIONS

ABSTRACT

Since 1998, *the French Community of Belgium has a very systematic way to identify compulsory schools which could receive extra means (positive discrimination) based on a formula related to socio-economic characteristics of each school's population. After a mechanistic identification of schools, the Government could add some schools according other objectives indicators not taken into account in the general formula. Once the schools that may get the means devoted by the law on the positive discrimination are acknowledged, each one presents a report on its own action proposals. The first purpose of the article is to introduce a small scale study on schools which are rejected by the general formula and argue in order to receive extra money regarding objectives characteristics not taken into account by the formula. The case studies involve school visits, face to face interviews with principals, study of the school's neighbourhood and population. The main topic of the paper is to identify the*

nature of new objective indicators suggested by the schools and the possibility to add such indicators to the general formula, according the philosophy of positive discrimination mechanisms. The second purpose of the article is to review and present the types of solutions that are proposed by the school staffs in order to secure for each pupil equal opportunities of social emancipation, according to the law. This step prefigures the implementation of an action evaluation system based on local projects rather than on an approach centrally defined on good practice. The topic is the presentation of a typology of the actions proposed by the education staffs of the schools which receive additional means in order to better understand their sense of "equal chances of social emancipation" (as mentioned in the Law).

Introduction

In 1998, the French Community of Belgium adopted a decree which defined very strictly the procedure through which additional resources are to be allocated to schools. These schools were identified as taking students coming from lower social backgrounds. This procedure has been made more accurate and automated in 2002 (Demeuse 2003).

School identification is grounded on a formula which takes students' socio-economic features into account (Demeuse and Monseur 1999[1]). The student population of a school is defined according to the socio-economic features of the areas they live in. These areas consist in rather limited units – of about *five hundred* inhabitants – and are called "statistical areas". The distribution of these areas has been made by the National Institute for Statistics and there are almost *ten thousand* of them in the French Community of Belgium.

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1 An English version (translation) of the paper is also available on the Web: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00003648.htm>

The schools that benefit by positive discriminations ("D+ schools") are those that take a determined proportion of students living in an area presenting some objective features:

– living standards lower than the national average, taking housing, family resources and diplomas into account;
– a higher proportion of unemployed persons in relation to the whole population;
– a higher proportion of families benefiting by some social allocations or support.

The identification of positive discrimination schools is based on an automated procedure: a socio-economic index is calculated for every student, according to his or her living place, and this index is then related to his or her school. The average of all the students' indices of a given school helps to know the index value of the school. The schools are then classified according to their index value; primary and secondary education schools that take about *twelve percent* of most disadvantaged students are selected to benefit by additional resources, which means that the population of the positive discrimination schools is not allowed to exceed twelve percent of the whole school population.

The law also foresees the possibility to add to the list of the schools recognized as "in positive discrimination" through the automated calculation procedure, a limited number of schools representing about 1% more of the whole school population. These added schools are in difficult situations but, for various reasons, have not been retained by the general formula. This addition of schools must be operated by the general Councils, on the basis of objective social, economic, cultural or educational criteria. The list of these schools is set up every three years.

Our study consists in the analysis of the situation of the schools that are not recognized as schools in positive discrimination, but that consider they ought to benefit by additional resources. It is to result in a proposal of objective indicators aimed at helping the policy makers

to make a selection when they will have to add some schools to the automated-listed positive discrimination schools.

The first step of the study included visiting the schools, interviewing the school principals and/ or other members of the educational teams, observing and analysing the school and student backgrounds. The second step, which is now beginning, will aim at formalizing some possible new indicators in order to help the general Councils to identify the "1% schools" to add to the automated list.

The Method

Preliminary Contacts with the School Principals

The first contacts with the principals took place by phone calls; these first contacts helped to get an idea about their major preoccupations in terms of school difficulties suffered by disadvantaged students. All the principals first mention a high proportion of foreign or of foreign origin students,[2] of students who are not French-native speakers, of students not or not much supported by their parents. Some parents, indeed, may prove to be not able or not eager, for various reasons, to provide their children with scholar and educational support.

Taking into account those aspects, spontaneously mentioned by the principals, raises some issues including:

– If children of some foreign origins are more subject to school failures, it is not only because of language or cultural reasons, but also often because they are, on average, poorer, coming from families where the parents are less academically qualified or work on tasks less valued than Belgian citizens do; it is at least the case

[2] The proportion of foreign students or students of foreign origin – here arises the issue of identifying that typical population through the available data – has been retained as an aggravating criterion, despite the negative reactions of the members of parliament of foreign origin. These one claim that this type of approach leads to a risk of stigmatisation, whereas other criteria, partially covered by the foreign origin, such as the socio-economic level or the insufficient knowledge of the teaching language, are the really unfavourable factors (Demeuse 2002).

for the first generation immigrants. Now, these variables – level of incomes, level of studies and occupational status in the households- are already taken into account to build the socio-economic index of the areas. Furthermore, the children who have been living in Belgium for less than one year can benefit by another solution to get a satisfactory skill in the teaching language : the "bridge" classes (*Classes passerelles*), meant for the newcomers.[3]

– Principals describe the situation of their school in an intuitive and rough way, and illustrate them with lots of anecdotes that, though rather meaningful, seem difficult to objectivise on the basis of available and reliable data. Schools rarely have efficient and sufficient means to collect and supply accurate and objective information.[4]

Interviews

In each of the eight visited schools, half-structured interviews have been hold with the principal and any person the principal whished to invite. In all the schools, the following subjects have been treated:

– evolution of the number of students;
– geographic situation of the implantation;[5]
– geographical origin of the students (local recruitment from the neighbourhood or not);
– perception of the socio-economic features of the students;
– school population of other schools in the neighbourhood;

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3 These are specific classrooms dedicated to the students who have been living in Belgium for less than one year and intended to help them to have a good grasp of the French language through accommodated programmes of study.

4 The data are generally collected only for administrative reasons (counting the students in order to calculate the grants) and the principals – who are in fact teachers with rather few training on statistical tools, even the elementary ones.

5 A school implantation is a part of a school located in a building. A particular school could have more than its central building and then more than one implantation. In spite of the number of implantations a school is defined as an administrative unit with a principal. In our field of interest, implantations could be taken into account to compute the positive discrimination index instead of the whole school when it is requested by the large differences among implantations of a school regarding the socio-economic characteristics of the students of each implantation.

– flows of students from and to the school;
– characteristics of the students that have not been identified when the index of the school was set;
– consequences of the non-recognition of the school in positive discrimination on the day-to-day running and specific school difficulties of the students.

Analysis of the Collected Data during the School Visits

The documents, like students' registers or lists, we selected with a view to make a deeper analysis shared several characteristics:

– They supply information which can be collected on a larger scale (for instance, the students' address or the day of their entry to the school).
– They should enable a more accurate review of some aspects of the issue of the "disadvantaged students", but nevertheless, going beyond the logic of the "positive discrimination" decree (for instance, more accurate localisation of the students of a given school in their origin area).
– Some pieces of information which have been analysed may help to introduce an educational dimension to the index but it supposes to make the link with the socio-economic background of the concerned students (for instance, analysis of absenteeism and dropping out).

Unfortunately, when we began the data analysis, we had to dismiss a lot of documents supplied by the schools for different reasons: they were irrelevant, grounded on unclear information sources, they had obvious quantitative errors, they described useless trivial details in our wider perspective, etc.

Issues at Stake

After the deeper analysis of the data and the interviews, we propose two kinds of issues to cope with:

- The first one, "analysis of the students' areas of origin", is definitely embedded into the logic consisting in taking into account the socio-economic index of the origin area of each student of a given school in order to set the average index of the school. However, we will try to go further and to localise more accurately the students inside their area.
- The other issues, "mobility-instability of the students, absenteeism and external delays", lie within the scope of a logic orientated towards the school. They could form a composite index of simultaneous difficulties if it is possible to define an approach which helps to check whether or not the students' behaviour, in each of the retained domains, is correlated with some of their individual socio-economic characteristics.

According to the principals we met, it seems obvious that the phenomena of absenteeism and entries to schools at any moment of the school year are overall typical of some disadvantaged categories of the student population. It is also obvious that both phenomena make the school life still more complex, on the organisational as well as on the educational aspects. Nevertheless, there is presently no element that would help to make a true link between those behaviours and the socio-economic background of the students.

The results obtained during the schools' visits and from the analysis of the collected documents can be described briefly. We will first review the analysis of the spatial data (refinement of the socio-economic information coming from the living place of the students) and the analysis of the data coming from the information collected in the schools.

Analysis of the Students areas of origin

At least two elements justify the deeper analysis of the students' area of origin of the students of a given school:

- Several principals claim the socio-economic background of most students is becoming lower and lower. But, in the meantime, we observe a positive evolution of the average socio-economic index of several statistical areas where the children come from.
- A quick look at the lists of the students' address of some schools (after the streets have been classified by statistical areas) shows that the children are not distributed homogeneously within the areas.

There is thus a strong assumption that schools (particularly primary education schools) apply a differential recruitment within the statistical areas studied, since these are not homogeneous in comparison with the calculated socio-economic index. If this assumption can be verified, that could mean that, for some schools, the statistical area is a too large unit which does not take into account the specific situation of the students. A particular school could thus be disadvantaged because of average area indices more favourable than the students' actual situation or than the actual situation of particular streets where they live.

From the data available in the files of the school year 1998–99, we identified, for each school visited, the areas where a sufficient number of students come from (at least ten in our case).

The limits of each of these areas and the streets which compose them have been drawn on a detailed map. That first map supplies a picture of the geographic surface area of the recruitment fields of a school.

From the address lists of the students going to the school implantations selected in 2003–04, two kinds of analysis can be applied:

- Finding possible changes in the way of recruitment of the schools (evolution of the number of students coming from each key area,

evolution of the average index of these areas, appearance of new areas, etc.);

and, above all,

– Locating precisely each student in his or her own area (in his or her street) and identifying possible sub-areas which would be quite different from the socio-economic point of view.

The situation of an implantation of the school n°2 offers a good example of the lack of school population homogeneity.

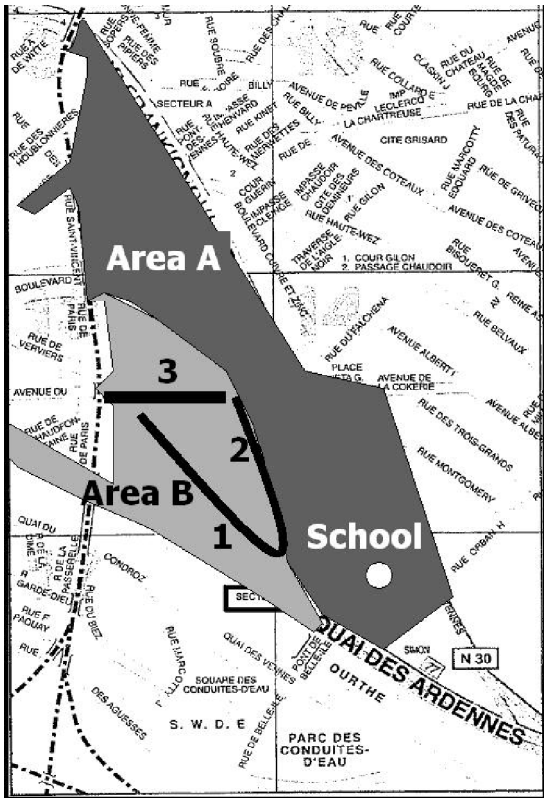

FIGURE 1.
Description of the recruitment of a particular school (School n° 2)

TABLE 1. School population and recruitment in the neighbourhood (number of students)

	From the individual data 1998–99	In 2003–04 (information supplied by the school)
Population of the implantation	81	71
Students coming from area A, where the implantation is situated (dark area on the map)	26	22
Students coming from area B (soft grey on the map)	32	42

For this implantation of school n°2, two key areas have been identified (on the map, A is in dark and B is in soft grey) which help to localise 71.6% of the 81 students in 1998–99 and 90% of the 71 students in 2003–04.

The average indices of these two areas are much higher than the limit fixed by the government to identify the positive discrimination schools. It is then interesting now to analyse how school recruits a population the principal presents as being very disadvantaged.

First of all, we have to consider the area B, where 57% of the students of the implantation come from (in the school year 2003–04). Those particular students are located in five of the 15 streets of the area, and 65% of them in only *two* streets. When we went on to the field, we could observe that the street number one on the map (with 19 students living there) has almost only social accommodations, which are very old, rundown and not well maintained. In the street number *two* of the same area, where *ten* students live, there are poor houses with restrained dimensions, very often inhabited by several households, as the numbers of bells at the front doors show. The

difference is important when comparing with other streets of the same area, where no student of the implantation comes from. For instance, the street number *three*, which has big *bourgeoises* houses, is mainly inhabited by households where at least one member has a profession (we can see it thanks to the copper plaques and the single bells at the front doors). In this typical case, it's a matter of a non-homogeneous area, with at least two sub-areas, one of them being very favoured and the other one very disadvantaged. The implantation we are considering does only recruit from the disadvantaged part of the area. Nevertheless, the disadvantaged students of the area bring together with them an average area index which is pulled upwards because of the situation of streets such as the street number *three*.

The analysis has been made for *five* of the *six* primary education schools and we could observe that the students of *four* of these schools are not distributed evenly within the areas, but mostly come from one or some particular streets of these areas.

In secondary education schools, recruitment is much more scattered. It's almost impossible to identify some key areas. For example, in 1998–99, the 327 students of the school number *seven* come from 169 different statistical areas. The 801 students of the school number *eight* come from 235 different statistical areas!

The analysis on the primary education does not seem to be applicable to the secondary education schools.

Yet, the principals argue they make their recruitment, within each area, in the most disadvantaged part of the population, the more so as the schools organise technical and vocational study programmes.

The problem our research team is facing now is that there are no public data about lower levels than the area level. To be able to differentiate the indices at a lower level than the area level, we should apply a complex solution, which would need a several-step research work, first evaluating the index value from individual values, which is the case today, then re-calculating the individual values of the students on the basis of the school they go to. This method is presently investigated.

Analysis of mobility and instability of the students

Among the information supplied by the schools themselves, the issue of mobility and instability of the school population has been selected for the following reasons:

- It is spontaneously mentioned by all the principals we met. According to them, mobility and instability are mainly due to disadvantaged students;
- Instability raises problems in the school career of the concerned students as well as in the organisational and educational running of the school;
- At first view, it seems possible to measure instability on the basis of data that are objective and available in the school.

Two complementary approaches have to be followed. The first approach concerns the date of student entry to the school. This piece of information was easily available and accessible in each school. While reviewing these dates, we can see that a significant proportion of students come to the school after the 30th of September.[6] And we know that moving explain only a very small part of these "late entries" to schools. A selection was made for each school about the entry month of all the students going to school in 2003–04. A mere dynamic two-way table supplies for each class the number of students who arrived on each month of the school year.[7] For instance, we have the following table for the school number one (tables 2 and 3).

6 The school year begins on September 1st.

7 We consider here the entry month of a pupil in spite of his year of entry. Then, in table 2, 4 pupils now in 1st year of primary education (P1) join the school in January (it could be during the year 2003–04 or during a previous year, during his pre-primary education).

TABLE 2. Entry month at school n°1 for the three pre-primary and six primary classes (2003–04)

Month	**Class**									
	M1	*M2*	*M3*	*P1*	*P2*	*P3*	*P4*	*P5*	*P6*	**Total**
January	5		4	4	1	2		1	2	19
February	1	1	2		3	2	1			10
March	3		2		2	1	2	1	2	13
April	1	2	2	1			1		1	8
May	4	1	2	1			1	2	1	12
June				1	1					2
July[8]										0
August[8]										0
September[9]	16	8	20	24	20	22	19	18	22	169
October	5	1	1	2		1	3	2		15
November	7	3	1		1		2	2	3	19
December			1	1	1					3

On a total number of 270 (pre-primary and primary schools together), 169 of them go to school in September and 101 of them, or 37.4%, at another moment of the year.

The situation of the pre-primary school being rather specific (a lot of children go to school at the age of two years and a half, whatever the moment of the school year), we will just consider the students enrolled in the school for or after the first year of primary education.

On the total number of 77 students enrolled in the school for or after the first year of primary education, 15 of them, or 19.4%, came at a moment distinct from September, even though enrolment is

8 Holiday period: no entrance at school.

9 In grey, month of entrance at school: September.

TABLE 3. Entry month at school n°1 for the pupils who join for the first time one of the six primary classes of the school in 2003

Month	**Class**						
	P1	*P2*	*P3*	*P4*	*P5*	*P6*	**Total**
January		1				1	2
February		1					1
March			1			1	2
April							0
May							0
June							0
July							0
August							0
September	10	9	9	13	11	10	62
October	1			3	1		5
November				2	1		3
December	1	1					2
Total	**12**	**12**	**10**	**18**	**13**	**12**	**77**

compulsory before the first working day of September (a special dispensation is required after the 30th of September).

It would be convenient, to be able to measure the significance of this factor of instability/mobility, to compare the situation of a higher number of schools in this aspect. It could be then possible to check if there is a link between the average index of the school and the significance of the phenomenon of the student mobility.

The second approach to the phenomenon of the student mobility focuses on assessing the significance of the student flows. All the principals we met mentioned a significant yearly renewal of their

school population. Some of them talk about such renewals as representing a third part of all the students each year.

The data collected in the schools do not help us to make a deeper analysis of the phenomena but we think that, in the medium term, all of them should be able to supply the date of entry, as well as the possible date of leaving for each student and each class.[10] To be appropriate, the analysis should focus on the data available from the second grade in primary education and from the grade eight in secondary education. The distribution according to the level of study will help to distinguish the natural leavings (for instance, end of the sixth year), from the other ones. It could be interesting to observe the recurrence of the phenomena over a period of several years.

Moreover, the results of the student instability analysis could be usefully enriched by more accurate data about the school careers of the students, not only in terms of school changes, but also study programme changes or implantation changes. This type of information will be taken into account in the second phase which is presently ongoing.

Analysis of internal and external delay

The school delay represents in the French Community of Belgium a very significant and worrying issue. Grade retention does not concern evenly all the students, whatever their socio-economic background or, in the secondary education, their study programme. Crahay (1996, 46–47) focused on the stronger and stronger dualisation occurring between the distinct study programmes of the secondary education. In the school year 1992–93, 37% of the students finished the general study

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10 Demeuse and Delvaux (2004) have analysed, in the Belgian French-speaking background, the students' mobility between two school years (total number of the school population, years of reference: 15th of January, 2002 and 15th of January, 2003). This mobility level is higher than 10% in primary education and can reach 30% in the secondary education. The mobility rates we present here above change significantly according to characteristics of the students or of the school where they go to. It is also to be noted that the students going to D+ schools (and with similar characteristics of gender, age, school delay, nationality and study level) present more mobility than students of other schools.

programme with at least a one-year delay. A decrease in the delay rates has been observed for the last decade in that study programme. During the same period, delay rates increased from 75% up to 80% for the students of the vocational grade *twelve*. The available data for the school year 2002–03 confirm these tendencies, since 28% of the students of the general grade twelve have at least a one-year delay, versus 74% of the students of the technical grade *twelve* and 80% of the students of the vocational grade *twelve*.

In the first school which organises technical and vocational secondary education, 28.5% of the students have a delay of at least *three* years! Only 10% of the students are on the right time in their study programme schedule. In the other visited school, thanks to the supplied data, we were able to distinguish the external delay of the students, that is to say the delay that has been built up in one or several other schools before the entry to the considered one, from the internal delay, which is generated in the considered school. On the total amount of 745 students enrolled in this late school, already 237 of them (31.8%) have at least a one-year delay at the very moment they come to this school.

If we can verify that some schools welcome more than others students with school difficulties (generated in previous schools and in this one), then this indicator is worth being kept. A limit should be fixed after a comparison had been made between more schools and after a connection had been made with the average index of the implantation.

For a deeper analysis of the issue, it is important to go back to the individual data aimed at by some clauses of the "monitoring decree" we mentioned above. Nevertheless, this solution has a high risk: if a compensatory advantage was granted to schools which take students with a study delay built up in other previous schools, without penalizing them, we can assume that, within a system where there is already a very strong, while implicit, hierarchy between schools, some very selective schools "get rid of" their lower students through grade retention and an advise of orientation towards a less selective or more open school.

Analysis of absenteeism

At first sight, the analysis of absenteeism seemed interesting. We believed we would be able to make curbs, comparisons between schools. But we had to decrease our expectations, for several reasons:

- The data available in primary education schools are in the attendance registers completed by each teacher in his or her own classroom. There are very accurate guidelines about the way of doing it, but the reality is that there are very distinct modalities between schools, and even between classes. While it is often possible to point out the total amount of absences, it is much more difficult to distinguish the justified absence (covered by a medical certificate or another official document) from the other ones. Moreover, we can observe a variable level of allowance between schools, for instance about the type of justification supplied by the parents.
- In secondary education schools, absenteeism arises differently since all the schools must hold the account of student unjustified absences, mainly because of the clause of the Mission Decree which foresees, from the second degree, the loss of the status of regular student for those who reached a certain number of unjustified half-day absences.

If we consider that the management of these "absenteeism files" and the prevention actions related to school dropping out represent an additional and significant burden for some schools, then it seems relevant to take into account, as far as primary education is concerned, an overall index about absenteeism which could be set up from regular students' average per month-attendance rates (those data are checked).

For the secondary education school, objective data about unjustified absences could be used to build an index peculiar to the school. This index could be weighted by the number of students who lost their quality of regular student. Nevertheless, the loss of the regular student quality has some consequences on the financing of the

school, which does not lead schools to be particularly strict in that type of registration.

To give an example, let's see the case of the school number eight. Among the *two hundred and four* students of the grades *nine* and *ten* of the vocational study programmes, *fifty-one* of them had more than 19 half days of absence on the 27th of April. *Twenty-eight* of them had more than 29 unjustified half days of absence. Those numbers range from 30 to 186 half days!

In this aspect, previous verifications could be done to establish that, like the principals think, the phenomenon concerns more the disadvantaged students. But the data of each school are not centralized.

Taking this issue into account also arises some questions. In a caricaturing mood, it makes you wonder if it is relevant or not to "reward" the schools where the students are most absent. But this type of indicator can also be considered as very useful to spot the most disadvantaged students, which could help to weight the average index of the school since we could observe that the average index of the origin area does not always reflect accurately the students' socio-economic background.

Provisional conclusion

The data involved in the calculation of the average index of the statistical areas are completely external and independent from the school.

On the other hand, the individual data needed to exploit the proposed suspected issues, such as the student mobility and instability, their external delay and their absenteeism, involve some factors linked to the school or are dependant on a gathering of information made by the school. The case studies showed how much it is difficult for the schools to objectivise the reasons for which they should be added to the list of the positive discriminations beneficiaries. This difficulty is due to the weakness of the data collected on the local level and transmitted to the central level into a system which suffers

by the very large independence of the local actors, together with a tremendous responsibilities scattering and a central administration which is short of workforce and control procedures. At the local level, mainly in the primary education school, the lack of data and of computer and administrative skills to deal with them makes the principals' argumentation rather weak since not much supported. Furthermore, the lack of research about the effective criteria of school success, which can be understood in a system which has, until now, always refused to organise true external evaluations of the students' skills through harmonised procedures, often reduces the possibility for the policy-makers at the central level as well as the actors at the local level to make assumptions.

The review by general Councils of the situation of some schools requires therefore the collection of additional information. These data could be required at first sight for all the schools, through the counting unit, or be the subject of a two-step procedure: first, to make the list of the schools which could be reviewed for which the additional information would be then required. In this case, it is very important to determine a priori a school selection procedure.

In any case, it is urgently required to find procedures of harmonisation of the data collection. We are now facing the following alternative: either the law allows to demand the national register number when the enrolment takes place (but, in that case, what about the students in irregular situation?), or schools must have correct data-entry software, which would integrate also the complete list of streets and codes of the areas of the country.

The ideal situation would be the simultaneous implementation of both solutions, which would help, furthermore, to avoid some anomalies we noted during our research work:

- some (sometimes significant) numbers of students for whom there is no mention of area of origin;
- entry difficulties about some streets and their connection with existing areas by the localities;

– problems due to the quality of the data collection and entry in the schools.

The next step of our study will review the concrete possibility to operationalise the proposed indicators on the level of the school system.

The analysis of the indicators we reconsider only represents one of the five main lines of research such as they were defined in the positive discrimination assessment and global monitoring plan of the educational system, which also foresees:

– A comparative analysis of the school careers of the students enrolled in "D+ schools" and of those going to other schools;
– A study entitled "Positive discriminations: what is there behind the label?", which aims at reviewing all the projects that have been proposed by the schools that benefit from additional resources, in order to assess their efficiency. More precisely, it's a matter of analysing the planned actions, their justification and the way they are actually implemented. The main issues in that phase can be summarized like that: "Which are the expected effects and how much are the actors satisfied about the started actions? Are their objectives reached or can the actions still be improved and, if the answer is yes, in which way?
– An actualisation of the socio-economic indicators related to the statistical areas.
– An evaluation of the effects of the "D+ policies" on the distribution of students between schools and of the potential risk of confirmation or even strengthening of the school segregation. The central question is then: do parents, students and educational teams feel a stigmatisation?

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