

## **From ideology to practical means : reactions to “renovated education” (1971) and “contract for the school” (2005) in the French-speaking Belgian press**

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### **Proposal information**

Do educational reforms that politics intend to implement correspond to the ideas of schooling shared in Belgian society? If so, does the implementation of these reforms have more chance to succeed? Our paper tries to answer these questions by analysing the reactions in the press to two educational reforms in French-speaking Belgium: “renovated education” in 1971 and “contract for the school” in 2005.

This work is undertaken in a context of change, as well regarding the content of the corpus under study as the socio-political issues it addresses. A new educational reform is actually under construction since 2015 in French-speaking Belgium: “the pact for an excellent education”. One of the conditions of success of such an endeavour is understanding what Lessard & Carpentier (2015) have called “the cognitive framework of the education system”. Our work is a contribution to the understanding of this cognitive framework. It is in line with the works of notably Lessard & Carpentier (2015) and Dupriez (2015) but is applied to the French-speaking Belgian education system and uses the press as a valuable resource recording the reactions to educational reforms.

At the start of our analysis of educational reforms is the observation of depreciation of technical and vocational curricula and the impulse of change about this situation. In 2005, the “contract for the school” was given as one of its objectives to reassert the value of these curricula. More than 10 years later, the “pact for an excellent education” does the same observations and sets the same objective. Studying the history of education in Belgium, one can notice that this objective was already set in 1971, when the major reform called “renovated education” was devised and implemented. What are the factors explaining this “failed implementation” (Lessard & Carpentier) of yet generous ideas and reforms? Our hypothesis, in line with neo-institutionalism, is that there is a dissonance between the ideas underpinning the reforms and the cultural cognitive framework (Lessard & Carpentier, 2015). We think that the press is a useful and pertinent tool to grasp it.

It has been shown that Belgian technical and vocational education have a poor image among the pupils (Ferrara & Friant, 2014). This depreciation has its source in multiple factors such as access through relegation, culture of grade repetition, and a humanist culture favouring intellectual education against technical or vocational training. There is, however, an enduring political will to reassert the value of these curricula. In particular, two educational reforms have notably pursued this objective: “renovated education” in 1971 and the “contract for the school” in 2005 (the Pact for an excellent education is now a more ambitious and comprehensive reform, but as it is being designed at the time of writing, we haven’t got the necessary perspective to analyse the reactions to it).

It is difficult to give a short definition of what was “renovated education”, born in 1971 and dead approximately ten years later. In his preface to a famous book by Anne Van Haecht (1985) analysing renovated education, Henri Janne explains that it forms the final outcome of a long historical process that he calls “progressist”, characterised by its search of social equality through education. Doing this, it leaned upon “new pedagogy” that criticised, in the name of equality, the encyclopaedism, memorising and authoritarian discipline promoted by “traditional pedagogy” and favoured creativity, critical mind and personal autonomy. More than thirty years later, with the “contract for the school”, what has become of this idea of education?

## **Method**

We take a “neo-institutionalist” perspective in analysing change. This perspective acknowledges the importance of the cognitive framework as a condition for action. In this context, the press is regarded by several authors as a key actor. It conveys values of several stakeholders in the educational reform and it influences policymakers in their identification of possible problems in education (Cattonar & Mangez, 2014). Moreover, Marty (2010) defines the press as a vector of communicative social interactions forming collectively and legitimately constructed entities. We therefore consider the press as a witness of the cognitive framework of the time.

Two corpuses of press articles have been gathered. The first one consists of all the articles (n=183) broaching the subject of “renovated education” published in two national journals (Le Soir and La Libre Belgique) between 1971 and 1973. Given the absence of pre-existent digitalisation, these articles have been scanned and treated by an OCR. The second corpus consists of all the articles (n=197) broaching the subject of the “contract for the school” published in Le Soir and La Libre Belgique in 2005.

Two types of analysis have been performed on these two corpuses: a qualitative thematic analysis using an “ascending” process (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012) (only on 124 articles from 1971 and 76 articles from 2005) and a lexicometric textual analysis using IRaMuTeQ (on the whole corpus).

Thematic analysis consists in manually attributing themes to units of the text, then making groups of themes, building a “thematic tree” synthesizing the corpus (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012). One thematic tree has been built for each “reduced” corpus. They then have been compared to detect similarities and differences between the two corpuses.

Lexicometric analysis is a quantitative analysis of text leaning upon the counting of co-occurrences of words. Two lexicometric techniques were used to analyse our data: descending hierarchical classification (Reinert, 1983) and correspondence analysis (Benzécri, 1973). Descending hierarchical classification cuts the corpus into classes according to a “distance” measure based on co-occurrences of words in segments of texts. It results in a limited number of classes having a coherent structure, enabling us to interpret it. Correspondences analysis consist in an analysis of a co-occurrence

matrix of words, placing words on two-dimensional coordinate system. It enables us to visually interpret the distances and similarities between groups. In order to implement these analysis, a first manual cleaning of the corpuses was necessary.

### **Findings and conclusions**

Our thematic analysis shows some fundamental differences between the two periods. We interpret it as the evolution from an ideological debate, or at least a debate on the very philosophy of the reform, towards a technical debate. Renovated education has been the subject of a confrontation between two very different ideas of education. On the one hand, the promoters of the reform defended ideals of democratisation, proposed a radical change of education, based on new pedagogy. On the other hand, the detractors defended a conservative idea of education and used arguments such as merit and education of the elite.

In 2005, there is no apparent debate on the objectives. The fact that the proposed evolution are not as revolutionary as renovated education must play a role. But the reactions to the contract for the school are almost only pragmatic criticisms, reminding that the intentions are praiseworthy but questioning the effectiveness of the proposed means. We can't however reject the hypothesis of a variety of ideas of education in 2005. It is possible that our thematic analysis simply doesn't grasp them.

Our lexicometric analyses cast another light on our corpuses. The descending hierarchical classification of the reaction to the contract for the school shows three classes of words such as freedom, inequalities, segregation, market, choice, struggle, that suggest some ideological or political arguments. This corpus also seems richer in terms of number of classes than the "renovated education" corpus. As for the correspondence analysis, it enabled us to compare the position of various groups (teachers, parents, trade unions, researchers, politicians) on a two-dimensional coordinates system. It shows differences between the two corpuses, but, again, catches an ideological dimension in the contract for the school corpus that our thematic analysis did not detect.

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