

Education policy issues in French Guyana

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Abstract

French Guiana is an overseas territory subject to the same legislation as metropolitan France but which must face, sometimes alone, its own social and economic challenges. This article illustrates the strong inequalities that persist between French Guyana and metropolitan France in the field of education policies. As we will demonstrate, education policies are completely unsuited to the local context and reveal a colonialist legacy in their blind application. It is therefore a question of analyzing the policies implemented by France in recent years to combat these inequalities, analysing their effectiveness and establishing their limits.

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Located in South America, French Guiana has been an administrative region of France since 1946 and is considered a territorial community. French Guiana is the second-largest French department in terms of territory, but the second smallest in terms of population. Although French Guiana is an integral part of French territory and is subject to the same national laws and policies, it is considered a local community. This means that French Guiana has a certain amount of power devolved by the State to govern its territory under public law. In this sense, it has a degree of independence from France in terms of regional policies. This territory is defined by significant disparities, particularly in the field of education.

We may be led to ask ourselves what are the determining factors leading French Guyana to educational reforms and how the proposed new education policies are reflected in the country's new education policies.

French Guiana's education system is unique because this region faces many challenges. Its choice to integrate into the French metropolis through departmentalisation is contrasted by its geographical and cultural distance and its identification with an Amazonian environment, which contribute to the formation of a Guyanese identity. In this sense, Guyana is an interesting choice for the study of educational policies. It is logical to compare the application of national policies on the territory and the many adaptations that need to be made to take account of regional specificities, notably thanks to law n°2013-595 of 8 July 2013 on the orientation and programming of the re-foundation of the École de la République.

Educational policy issues encountered by French Guyana

Guyana faces many challenges in the field of education. First of all, social inequalities between pupils are very marked. More than half of the students in secondary vocational education are children of parents who are not in the labour force, one third are children of workers or employees and 2.6% have parents who are managers or professionals.

Another challenge for the academy of French Guiana is to cope with the massive increase in school enrolment, with the number of pupils increasing by 26% between 2005 and 2016. This poses a problem in terms of recruiting new teachers who find Guyana unattractive, but also in terms of infrastructure: Pascal Briquet, a teacher at the Justin Catay high school in Cayenne, confided in 2013: "Every year, 800 to 1,000 secondary school students do not find a place at the high school"¹.

As far as teaching is concerned, there is a lack of teaching materials in the schools. To cope with this difficulty, teachers have had to improvise with the means at hand. To teach children to count, for example, teachers had to build an abacus made of seeds. To teach music, they improvised percussion instruments by hitting them with sticks. This shows a real disparity with the French metropolis where teachers have real musical instruments, computers and projectors in the majority of schools. The teacher training is also neglected. In 2011-2012, 53% of teachers in charge of education were untrained and had

¹ BEYER, C. (2017). En Guyane, le défi de la scolarisation. *Le Figaro*. [online] Available at: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2017/04/03/01016-20170403ARTFIG00315-en-guyane-le-defi-de-la-scolarisation.php> [Accessed November 2020].

difficulty in capturing the attention of their students. In contrast, teachers recruited in French Guyana are characterised 'both by their extraneity in the midst of their practice and by their inexperience and geographical instability' (Léglise & Puren, 2005: 80), making any training temporary. For these teachers, the result is a lack of knowledge of the school situation in the département, its populations and its languages and cultures. Thus, despite the increase in the number of teachers, they are generally transient and their lack of knowledge of the local context does not enable them to fulfil their mission properly.

Moreover, the curriculum is not adapted to the historical and territorial context of French Guiana. A father of three children attending school in French Guiana said: "They know the kings of France, the castles, the Loire and the Seine, but they don't even know the distance between Cayenne and Saint-Laurent, they've never heard of the Tumuc-Humac Mountains"². This testimony highlights the lack of adaptation of school curricula, which is the consequence of the generalisation of schooling in French Guyana that took place at the time of departmentalisation, linked to a general policy of assimilation. Linguistic researcher Renault-Lescure (2000) notes that "[t]he transition to the status of an overseas department had very important consequences for education because it radicalised the cultural domination exercised by France over young Guiana Islanders; schools were primarily intended to teach them to be French and to integrate the ideology of progress [...]"³. Indeed, the main decisions come from Paris, taken by civil servants who have no idea of the territorial specificities of French Guiana.

We can also note that few students continue their studies in higher education: 33% of students leave the school system without a diploma. For those students who do complete the school curriculum, 74.6% of students at the Académie de Guyane obtained their baccalaureate in 2012, which is 10 points below the national average. Pupils are also limited by the lack of educational opportunities in the region. They are very often forced to study in metropolitan France, which fuels a brain drain phenomenon.

Thus, the Guyanese education system is by no means adapted to the territory. It has become inevitable to take into account certain particularities such as multilingualism, school dropout, but also insecurity and the high number of early pregnancies.

Public education policies and the resolution of inequalities

In 2013, new public policies for education reform were put in place throughout the territory to address the problems faced by French Guiana. The quality and equity of education were the most critical issues, requiring particular attention in the hinterland and remote river regions of Guyana, where education services were considered to be below national standards.

The first challenge was the shortage of teachers and their lack of training. The first education reforms in 2013 focused on building the capacity of teachers and improving the supply of teaching materials. Through this programme, teachers are able to adapt lessons to the needs of children and know how to create an environment that stimulates their learning and creativity. Teachers monitor their students

² Un témoignage en Guyane [online] Available at:

<https://www.un-temoin-en-guyane.com/blog/en-guyane-ecole-et-non-francophonie> [Accessed November 2020].

³ ALBY, S. LÉGLIS, I. (2007). La place des langues des élèves à l'école en contexte guyanais. Quatre décennies de discours scientifiques. S. Mam Lam Fouck. *Comprendre la Guyane d'aujourd'hui*, Ibis Rouge Editions, pp.439-452, 2007. hal-00243071

more closely and regularly through formal guidelines. This helps to ensure better learning outcomes. In response to the strong growth in the school population, the number of staff has increased: over the last ten years, the number of teachers has increased by 44%, while the number of administrative staff has increased by 24%. In this sense, some opportunities have been put in place such as the academic project 2014-2017. Its ambition is to develop the Ecole Supérieure d'Enseignement et d'Education (ESPE), to take charge of and support bachelors in teaching professions in order to create a local breeding ground in isolated sites. In addition, the distribution of 750 teaching kits, as well as curriculum-specific teaching materials, has made the courses easier for teachers and more interactive and interesting for students.

Multiculturalism is one of the central issues of education in French Guyana. It can be facilitated by specific policies such as the Mother Tongue Assistants (IML) scheme, which is specific to French Guyana. Forty IMLs work with kindergarten pupils who do not have French as their mother tongue, to help them master their mother tongue and culture and improve their acquisition of the French language. For a few hours a week, the IMLs accompany pupils with the same mother tongue to "welcome the children at their first contact with the school, then [to] develop their metalinguistic skills in their language" (Alby and Léglise). As far as pupil enrolment is concerned, the results of the last few years show that progress has been made in the reception of 3-year-olds: the enrolment rate at this age has risen from 65% in 2007 to 80% in 2013. To meet the growth in primary school enrolment over the last decade, schools have been built: between 2000 and 2013, 26 new schools were created to meet the demands of the public sector. Concerning secondary education, it can be observed that in 1999, only 35% of young people had a secondary school diploma, but by 2011, 45% of Guyana's population aged 18 to 24 had a secondary school diploma.

From an economic point of view, the academy of French Guiana is no longer as disadvantaged as it used to be. It is almost entirely classified as a Reinforced Priority Education Network, i.e. REP+, and benefits from the associated resources. In order to help families monitor and encourage their children's schooling, several financial aid schemes have been set up in French Guiana, such as means-tested grants and bonuses for secondary and high school students. This aid concerns 46.4% of middle and high school students. The cost of this budgetary effort amounts to €7.5 million in 2013. There is also the merit grant for a total of 800 euros. It is awarded to secondary school scholarship holders who have obtained a "good" or "very good" mark on the national brevet diploma, and scholarship holders who have distinguished themselves by their work in the third year can also obtain it. In 2013-2014, 728 students benefited from this scholarship. To go further, bonuses are awarded to scholarship holders according to type and level of study.

The education system is based on the teaching methods chosen at the entrance to the second, first and last classes and for vocational and technological training. In 2013, 5,281 tuition bonuses were awarded to students of the French Guiana academy.

EU education and training policies have also provided unexpected opportunities. Its Education and Training 2020 programme has the main objective of reducing early school leaving. The target for 2020 is to bring the proportion of early school leavers below 10%. If metropolitan France is above this threshold, it is a real challenge for French Guyana.

Comparative analysis of different territorial policies: the case of metropolitan France and Brazil

From the point of view of educational policies, it is interesting to compare French Guyana both with metropolitan France, to which it is linked, and also with neighbouring countries such as Brazil.

It seems essential to compare the education policies of metropolitan France with those of French Guiana, the latter being much more disadvantaged from a socio-economic point of view. Despite various quantitative and qualitative developments, the level of pupils in French Guiana remains below that of young people in metropolitan France. The positive trend in the schooling of 3-year-olds must therefore be continued to reach the level of metropolitan France, where schooling at the age of 3 has been total since the mid-1990s.

Moreover, in 2015, 76% of young Guiana Islanders aged 15 to 19 were enrolled in school, whether as pupils, students or apprentices, compared with 89% in mainland France. Furthermore, young people in French Guyana continue their studies for a shorter period than in the rest of France: more than one in two Guyanese no longer attend school from the age of 19, compared with 72% in mainland France at the same age. As for the proportion of young people obtaining their baccalaureate, it remains twice as high in mainland France (48%) since only 19% of Guyanese aged between 18 and 24 have their baccalaureate (INSEE 2014). The gap concerning higher education is widening: 23% of young people living in metropolitan France have a university degree, compared with only 7% of young Guiana Islanders.

From an economic point of view, it can be pointed out that 80% of Guyanese schoolchildren are in a priority education establishment compared with around 22% in mainland France in 2015. This idea is reinforced by the fact that one in three teachers in Guyana is not tenured, compared with only 3% in metropolitan France.

The gaps between the two are therefore significant and the policies undertaken in 2013 are struggling to reduce them.

Furthermore, if we make a regional comparison of French Guiana with a neighbouring country such as Brazil, we can see that inequalities persist.

In Brazil, classes are overcrowded, with about 50 pupils per class. As for teachers, they are poorly qualified and undervalued. Schooling is no longer compulsory after the age of 12, and 18% of children who are not enrolled in school are young people aged between 15 and 17. It is also noted that the problem of illiteracy still affects one in ten Brazilians over the age of 15, and one in four citizens does not know how to write or read well, even though he or she is in school. This illiteracy among Brazilians is reflected in the level of schooling, which does not exceed seven years on average. This figure is even higher in French Guyana, where 20% of the population cannot read or write. One of the most important problems in this neighbouring country is under-investment in education, sometimes seen as a secondary policy.

In Brazil, Amapá is the only state in the federation that is not connected by road to the rest of the country and is in a similar situation to Guyana. This is why the two executives of Guyana and Amapá, aware of their common interests and problems, have signed a bilateral agreement to establish cross-border cooperation on subjects such as education.

Conclusion

French Guyana is confronted with a diversity of cultures and knowledge. Law n°2013-595 of 8 July 2013 on orientation and programming for the re-founding of the École de la République has notably contributed to a 44% increase in the number of teachers, while administrative staff has increased by 24% and 26 new schools have been created. From a more economic point of view, it is important to underline that the education reform in French Guyana has enabled almost all schools to be classified within the framework of a reinforced Priority Education Network, the REP+, and therefore to benefit from the associated financial resources. Finally, from 2013 onwards, numerous scholarships have been awarded to the most deserving parents and children. Thus, more children have been able to attend school and, in particular, to continue their studies for a longer period.

Nevertheless, despite the significant progress made in the field of education policies, it remains important to decentralise education policies. On the other hand, French Guiana suffers from a lack of attractiveness. There are many requests for teachers to leave despite the 50% increase in salaries. Thus, the replacement of absent teachers is rarely guaranteed. It should also be added that one in three teachers was not tenured in 2015. Furthermore, school absenteeism affected 24% of 15-19-year-olds in 2015, and despite many efforts, 19% of 18-24-year-olds do not have a degree, which is one of the most important qualifications for further study in higher education and employment.

The challenges and recommendations that we can make following the conclusion of this study on French Guiana can be broken down into several points:

Firstly, Alby & Launey (2007) propose that teacher education should be built on the very notion of plurilingualism and, more broadly, on the school itself. To this end, we recommend a more elitist selection of teachers so that they are tenured and better able to adapt to the needs of pupils in this disadvantaged area. Avoiding the brain drain is another important challenge for the socio-economic development of French Guiana.

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