

Abstract

L'essentiel

L'intégrale

Rethinking the organization of pupils' time, at school and beyond school

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The organization of school time seems like an old issue that is always topical, the stakes and implications of which go far beyond the strict framework of the educational institution. Over the last 30 years, school in France has undergone various reforms aiming at “adjusting” the school calendar and time schedule to improve pupils’ learning and living conditions. This is still the purpose of the [National conference](#) opened to public debate in September 2010.

What are the recent results of educational research that may help to encourage new thinking on the subject? What are the alternative models which are being developed today in Europe and North America, as regards the organization of school time and as regards the synergy between the educational activities proposed to children both at school and after school? What lessons can we learn from the work which is evaluating these experiences? Such are the questions discussed in this *Dossier d'actualité*.

In France as in many countries, the **elementary rhythm of “the lesson”**, which lasts about **one hour**, is still today the organizing principle of life at school which, in secondary education, is broken up between the time slots in the timetable, according to the equation “one hour - one teacher - one discipline - one lesson - one class”. This **teacher-centred and not pupil-centred way of organizing teaching time** no longer appears suited to the present needs for a transverse and individualized approach to learning.

Experiments carried out in France, Sweden and the Netherlands show, however, that it is possible to reconsider **how time is used so that it becomes truly a “resource” at the service of education**. These experiments with a **“mobile”, “variable” or “flexible” time schedule** are based on significant team work by teachers, whose professional practices are transformed and enriched. These measures obtain **very positive results** in terms of **pupils’ open-mindedness** and **independence, learning strategies, social skills**, etc. They influence the **motivation** not only of **the pupils** but also of **the teachers** and lend themselves well to the use of **more active teaching approaches**.

At the school gates, **“free time” is in strong competition with school time**. School is no longer the only place nor the only time which allows children and teenagers to acquire knowledge, to build competencies, to socialize and to open up to the world. The media, libraries, the Internet, leisure and culture

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How do primary school children spend their time?

• Sleeping	41%
• Leisure	24%
• Personal hygiene, meals, travel, etc.	14%
• School	12%
• Media	9%

This breakdown is calculated on the basis of the average annual “time budget”.

From
Grand Lyon (2003).
[Les temps de l'enfant](#).

activities, exchanges with the family, friends and the environment all provide occasions for personal development, experiences and acquisitions that are different from those of the school; whether these are complementary or not, they are quite as important.

To get away from this competition and to make way for **compatibility of educational time** for children, in various neighbouring countries such as Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, measures such as “full-time school”, “all-day school”, “full-service schooling” and “extended school” are developing, which have in common that they associate an offer of varied, free or directed activities on the school premises: homework assistance, workshops, sports and artistic activities, voluntary help, etc. Primary and secondary schools are open every day for an extended period of time, sometimes also during the holidays. These measures are based on the school's collaborating with other local institutions. **School is redefined as a living arena that is both open and encourages unity.** Evaluations of these measures give an account of their positive effects on pupils' **social skills** and the **quality of the relations** which they develop with adults. All these experiments have a common denominator: **the disappearance of homework**, since pupils' personal work is done at school.

As it is too often posed, the question of the organization of school time refers to methods of time allocation (how much, how often and for how long?), in other words to a kind of “dose” of school time which is administered to pupils to help them swallow the educational pill. This approach confers supposed power on quantitative parameters which tend to recognize time as having value merely as a “provisional resource” that it is advisable to assign judiciously in order to derive benefit from.

Fortunately, the **action of time on teaching cannot be reduced to its quantity: the “quality”** of time that pupils and teachers spend together **seems to have a much greater impact** on pupils' motivation and academic success. Working to give quality to educational time: this is the project which could bring together all those involved in education.

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