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Identity construction and social cohesion:
the case of French high school students in boarding schools

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Abstract

Social, economic and political contexts prompt people towards various behaviors that guide their actions. In a time of crisis, individualism, strategy, and competition, highlighted among other behaviors by social action sociologists (Boltanski, Thévenot, 1989; Derouet, 2000), remain frequently observed behaviors potentially leading to withdrawal, the loss of social cohesion, the development of conflicts or even societal anomie (Durkheim). Within the context of a society in crisis, school is forced to take its part of the responsibility in the support of students before they enter a working life bound to be rather unstable. Thus, among the potential educational spaces outside the classroom, we took a special interest in boarding school structures.

Keywords: *boarding school – rites – interactions – construction of the self*

Within the framework of their studies, high school students are sometimes required, given the educational path they have chosen, to attend specific programs that can be far from home. Therefore, they often have to learn about living together within this very same school structure throughout the week. As boarders, these adolescents experience life in boarding school, a space where they are confronted with their peers, maintain relationships, evolve and construct their own identity. This new environment, remote from that of the family unit and its references, causes an upheaval to their bearings and points of reference, as formerly framed by the family structure.

How do these young people comprehend their new surroundings? What advantages does living at school have for students? In this informal setting, is it possible to speak of constructing oneself, the development of values and social cohesion, of workspace, with the view of preparing their future lives?

This article aims to examine the relationship between high school students in boarding structures and their environment, to see to what extent boarding schools meet the students and their parents' expectation as a framework for work and living in a difficult social and economic backdrop. For this purpose, we will rely on the analysis of the accounts given by boarders and by supervision personnel through a survey carried out in 2012 in the educational establishments of France's western region. Based on comprehensive research, we will seek to identify elements of identity construction by relying on the analysis of the students' views and on the activities proposed by the boarders and the educational staff on a collective as well as individual level (weekly observations conducted over a 5-year period of life in a boarding school). At first, we will examine this multidimensional framework and its connections with the construction of the adolescent's identity as a person and as a citizen in a world where "every man for

himself" prevails. Then, we will observe what impact boarding school has on these young people, what attitudes or worlds of reference tend to develop there (competition, performance, general interest, sense of belonging to a group, etc.) and what purpose they serve. Finally, the first results show the importance of rites and interactions in the individual and collective development of the pupils, future citizens, as well as the significant place that this informal kind of education occupies in their personal and social construction. They also convey the tension between individualism and living together during this specific school experience, as well as how the choices young people make condition their entrance into a society where everyone has to carve out a place for themselves.

I. Boarding schools: the history, framework and stakes of the past and the present.

Within a difficult social and economic context, we sought to understand the way in which today's youth prepares for their integration into society, within the framework of school as a continuum, that of boarding school. We first would like to take a detour through the history of this structure for it isn't without having an impact on the current views and expectations in the students' minds, but also in that of their families, particularly in this period of uncertainty where unemployment is on the rise.
In fact, the French model of boarding schools has long found itself at the crossroads of three histories: that of professional education, that of the family and that of upbringing. Initially, school wasn't associated with such matters. Rather close and little attended, school wasn't involved in these questions. It is later, between the Middle Ages and the 18th century that boarding schools found their usefulness in a professional dimension. This concerns in particular two sub-populations: the students placed as apprentices with a master and the clerics, whose professional training took place at the university. It was only during the 19th century that the university exclusively became a place of education. At the time, only the families from the bourgeois social classes opted to delegate the education and upbringing of their children to institutional organisms (Prost, 2004): the girls in convents and the boys in junior high schools, then high schools. This mode, among the higher social categories, of having the children taken in charge generally occupied a significant place, for it constituted the best way of being schooled. Education in this instance was thought as essentially geared towards school work and time for learning was focused on supervised study periods outside of classes. (Hébrard, 2001). Boarding schools were above all a space where studies were pursued, proposed to those who were geographically remote, but it was also especially a place of gathering for the elite who had at the time the leisure to dedicate themselves to intellectual work. Yet, the school level requirements and the cost entailed in placing a student in boarding school didn't allow access for everyone.
This image is still today profoundly embedded in the representations of boarding schools as a space or conditions for a child's pedagogical development. This somewhat monastic conception reassures parents who observe their children's difficulties with either getting down to work in the first place or in coming up against obstacles when learning their lessons.
Access to education in secondary schools being officialized by the principle of free education at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the flow of students has brought about the necessity to rethink the conception of taking in charge groups of adolescents over the whole week. Life is then artificially broken down into

school time and extracurricular time (Azaïs, 2004) even though at this stage of evolution for boarding schools, extracurricular time revolved mainly around activities whose nature was essentially pedagogical. However, we observe, as early as 1947, through the Langevin-Wallon plan, the will to incorporate an educational dimension in the construction of children and adolescents. *"Life at school, as a whole, offers the means to bring up children. The practice of social interactions can on its own have them acquire the respect for others and for their rights, the notion of general interest, the consent to comply with rules, the spirit of initiative, a taste for responsibility, and therefore school must give the pupils an ever greater share of liberty and responsibility, in the work carried out in class as well as in extracurricular occupations."* (Langevin-Wallon plan, 1947)

While the project was never implemented as such at the time, it not only marks a shift in the concept linked to taking into consideration the various school populations, but it also brings about the early steps in the current definition of school and its missions. These evolutions show the social and economic expectations of a changing world.

Boarding schools didn't escape this phenomenon. Overwhelmingly successful due to the reinforcement of schooling, made mandatory until the age of 16 (Berthoin law, 1959), boarding schools underwent collective conversions in great numbers (dormitories with bunk beds, overcrowded study rooms, etc.).

These transformations had strong consequences replicated by the life styles of the 60s and 70s which questioned the families' and the students' adherence to this kind of organization of pedagogical and social life. Indeed, the negation of individuality imposed by the overburdening lack of privacy caused by the increasing number of boarders, but also the wish for more freedom and a greater desire to listen to their children led to a disaffection of boarding schools, which had become a symbol of confinement and disciplinarian authority from a past era (Hébrard, 2001).

More liberal upbringing involving more emotions also coincides with the implementation of a unique junior high school approach as well as the multiplication of geographically close educational establishments, thus limiting the need for structures like boarding schools. Despite all this, while only 4% of the school-age children are boarders, no matter what kind of school they go to, this "educational formula" remains rather attractive to many families and students with regard to a difficult societal context and an entrance into working life that appear increasingly complex. The potentialities of a boarding school promoting a balance between pedagogical (work, supervised study periods, etc.), social and educational activities (meals, leisure, living together, etc.) seem at first sight to provide a rich framework allowing future generations to prepare for their entrance into society.

Today, two main conceptions prevail in the boarding school approach: either that of a service provided to families, developing the idea of satisfying a clientele, or that of a space with an educational purpose (Glasman, 2012). While behind these two conceptions the potentialities and the framework described above remain strong, the relationships with these structures diverge. Then, how do adolescents perceive boarding schools? What gains or disillusions do they expect from this experience for the construction of their own identity or in order to face their personal and professional future in an unstable society? Are the expectations the same for everyone? Many questions thus arise when taking into consideration the training and preparation of the younger generations for their future life.

413

II. From representations to experiences: boarding schools, a structure that bears a strong meaning

The survey carried out among boarding students is characterized by a high heterogeneity in the answers given. Depending on variables of a cultural, social, familial and educational nature, as well as on the representations, expectations and customs, we identify different appreciations of and relationships with this specific type of structure..

II.1 Composite representations and expectations

We've observed a first correlation between an adolescent and a professional project in the structure's approach as well as the expectations it arouses. In high school (the education level we chose to analyze), enrolling in a boarding school is essentially connected to educational aspects, which are ahead of all the other considerations. *"You know, I live in a small, isolated village... So, in order to make something of myself and hopefully find work later, I had to go in town, sixty kilometers from here... to choose a good high school [...],"* explains Adrien, a student in 10th grade, vocational high school.

Consequently, boarding school represents a possibility to go to school and undertake studies in relation to a maturely reflected professional choice while also remaining a way of accessing rare courses of study without having to be subjected to the inconvenience of a daily commute that could undermine one's efforts to study. This curriculum choice strategy is also identifiable in areas of excellence. Boarding school remains a condition allowing for steady learning and the hope to pursue a project. In this instance, parents strongly encourage the choice of a boarding school structure. It represents a structuring framework that some wealthier families have known or experienced.

This second correlation between the adolescents and their social background in the choice of boarding schools as a space for learning entails different expectations according to the composition of the family as a social unit and the social and occupational categories concerned. Without being simplistic, some choices are recurrent even if cases of defection (in the sociological sense of the term) appear, marginally shuffling the results obtained. In fact, boarding schools generally represent a structuring framework which has the benefit of combining a space including school and sports as well as social and cultural activities, along with personnel in charge of seeing to the development but also the success of the students. This idea of placing a third party in charge of education isn't without recalling the specter of the ancestral image of 19th and early 20th century boarding schools.

For more privileged social classes, this combination is reassuring and at times compensates for the supervision or control that may be lacking in the family unit because of the parents' overinvestment in their professional spheres. Concurrently, boarding school is also synonymous with the pedagogical supervision that can be provided for children coming from modest or even underprivileged backgrounds where there may be a lack of time or perhaps ability to follow a child's education. This environment, sought after by the parents, is often also sought after by the student as well, especially when he or she has a specific project path in mind. *"I wanted to be a fashion designer, and in France, it's not like there are tons of schools preparing for this career. Boarding school was the only way for me; I live two hours away!"* explained Amélie, a student in 10th grade, vocational high school.

On the other hand, this space and its rigorous functioning is sometimes deemed a burden by the students themselves when there's no adherence and when it's therefore seen as a constraint. *"It's more like hell, here... You can't tell yourself that things are cool here. You have to sit down at your desk and work otherwise the supervisor is instantly on your back, giving you an earful..."* explained Antoine, a student in 11th grade, preparing a vocational baccalaureate.

Depending on the chosen parameters, from which we've extracted these accounts, boarding schools constitute, for some, the first stage of a defined study path and the prerequisite conditions to make it a reality, whereas for others it is more akin to military barracks, thus generating a feeling of rejection.

Furthermore, the results also lead to a third representation of boarding schools highlighting a correlation between the adolescents and their wish for emancipation. Indeed, when teenagers come from areas that are geographically remote, for the great majority of them boarding schools represent a way of breaking away from geographical isolation to open up to the world, that of the city, that of another life. Moreover, the transition to this structure marks for many the end of a period connected with childhood and preadolescence. This physical rupture accelerates their entrance into an adolescent or even pre-adult world. Faced with the unknowns of this separation from the family unit, the boarders are quickly led to become independent in a more or less brutal fashion. Whether the emancipation is wished for or forced, boarding schools represent an experience wherein rites and rituals are at the heart of high school students' lives.

II.2 Boarding schools: a space for rituals

With the meaning of codified systems (Maisonneuve, 1999), rites punctuate and organize high school students' space and time outside scheduled classes. Interactions develop there and a certain integration of collective and individual rules takes place to assure one's own life, one's progression within a collective place and one's social life (living together). Erick Prairat (2002) thus speaks about the rites' socializing and integrating function, guaranteeing social cohesion. The codes that are imposed play a constructive role for the self, toward oneself and towards the other. In reality, these rites impose the right to be but also the duty to be, two dimensions that are essential in the construction of an individual and his or her integration into society.

However, these benefits are experienced differently according to the mobilization registers (Dubet, 2008) adopted during these adolescents' school experiences. The more the three registers – school habitus (itself depending on the student's cultural and social origin), the individual utility of education, and intellectual motivation (Dubet, 2008) – are integrated by the boarders, the more boarding school as a space of rituals appears as a structure that is reassuring, regulating and meaningful in the high school students' life path. *"I have everything here. I can choose to enroll in one activity or another, work during study period, more if necessary since there's a lot of work in my 11th grade science curriculum. I adapt my rhythm according to my needs but in a structured framework... uh, in a set schedule... and that's important for me, otherwise I tend to do everything at the last moment,"* this seventeen-year-old student told us.

Yet, the determinations highlighted here do not encompass the same meaning for all the boarding students depending on the mobilization of these registers. Thus, some of them permanently renounce integrating into this organization perceived as restrictive and infantilizing, especially among post-high school graduation students who pursue their

studies in a secondary school establishment. With age, and depending on their profiles, students seek more freedom and have an increasingly harder time accepting the rules.

II.3 Boarding schools: a lasting human experience

Nevertheless, a majority of boarders compare boarding school to a second family. Interactions with peers are of a significant importance. Daily life is punctuated by activities and gatherings revolving around this collective life. This socialization leads everyone to be confronted with others. Cultural and sports activities proposed within the framework of boarding school facilitate the development of these relations and of this state of 'living together'. Socio-educational clubs and in particular the "maison des lycéens" (students' house) [1] are places that are invested by the young boarders in order to create a space that is their own, an "among ourselves" that is the basis for a social life that is wished for and shared. The tastes and activities correspond to the adolescents' concerns; so do the discussions they share.

Through learning about relationships, boarding schools constitute for many a formative framework on a human level. Yet, this life in community isn't appreciated unanimously. The need to isolate oneself and the pressure of the group bring about some conflicts that make the management of one's daily life potentially difficult. Furthermore, some incidents related to the attraction of some illicit substances (drugs, alcohol, etc.) or the desire to experiment with what's prohibited disrupt the self-construction learning process and harm their schooling experience. Some students deal with this as best they can by sidestepping these temptations that they would evidently have encountered at some point or another in their life regardless of the school environment frequented.

These diverse social aspects are relatively underestimated in secondary education establishments compared with the boarding schools' benefits on a pedagogical level, both in the students' and in the parents' minds. In many respects, boarding school remains a powerful experience in a student's education, whether it is marked by surprising milestones or not.

II.4 Boarding schools: bearing a strong meaning from a pedagogical standpoint

The results of our survey highlight, under different forms, according to social backgrounds and the adolescents' experiences, the pedagogical or even professional dimension of such a structure. *"School is not my thing. So, one day, my parents said; since it's like this, you're going to boarding school. Now, you're going to do some real work! For me it was a disaster, I imagined military barracks... Make your bed, do your homework, go to bed! ...In the end, it's fairly cool and I tell myself that at least this way I*

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[1] Official bulletin n°1 of 4 February 2010 "The *Maison des lycéens* (MDL) meant to serve the students. It promotes the development of a cultural life within high school and gives the students an opportunity to be involved in projects, to learn about autonomy and to take significant responsibilities. It is substituted for socio-educational club that may still exist. The *Maison des lycéens* is an association that gathers students wishing to be involved in socially-responsible actions and take on responsibilities within the establishment in cultural, artistic, sports or humanitarian domains.

have a chance of getting a diploma to find a job," admitted this young man in cabinetmaking vocational school.

Boarding schools thus remain a place propitious for work, likely to lead to a positive conclusion in terms of graduation and professional future in a society presently struck by unemployment and filled with the uncertainty of achieving a stable life. This framework of authority which may seems coercive in the eyes of adolescents reveals, in the comments made, two significant aspects in the construction thereof.

On the one hand, the first form is that of an individualization process. Gradually, young people learn how to become autonomous (De Singly, 2006), make choices, become organized and take responsibility for themselves. On the other hand, the hindsight expressed in the following account demonstrates implicitly the conditions of an integrated work regimen that contributes to a proactive attitude towards increasing autonomy from an academic standpoint. This student in technological 11th grade reveals some specific aspects: "*I have everything within reach; books, IT equipment and above all my friends and the supervisors if I have a problem...*" Using a boarding school structure that way largely echoes the primary concerns expressed earlier in this article and responds to the necessity of pedagogical supervision, which is indispensible in the students' educational progression wished for by the families and the students themselves. Several strategies are proposed by the educational establishments on a material and human level. We observe here the importance of the prerequisite conditions for work, through the implementation of the technological tools required for the achievement of the learning processes, as well as the convenient access to documentary sources that may not necessarily be available within the families. This *objectified capital* (Bourdieu, 1979) provides the educational conditions for getting down to work, also promoted by a relationship of trust and a pedagogical support provided by peers as well as the institution's supervising personnel. The help offered, the exchanges and encouragements expressed during these interactions place young people in situations of being in relations with others, measuring the effects and adapting their work methods to gradually develop their autonomy, no longer under their parents' control but under the complementary observation of other students, in a structure offering a framework combining work and living together.

III. Boarding schools: a preparation for life?

Above all, boarding schools remain, according to the representations and expectations, a place for living and pedagogical supervision that substitutes for the families. In this proposition as a social framework, the concerns connected with educational subjects, personal development, and a regulating and protective environment are pivotal in the concerned parties' views.

As shown by the accounts collected, the purpose that boarding schools are expected to serve oscillates between the notions of control, support and autonomy (Azaïs, 2004). The diversity of contexts and the bringing together in a single place of different school groups lead the boarders, who are apart from their families, to be exposed to others with the goal of being able to cohabitate, or even live together.

The difference in these results brings out a deconstruction of one's own references to construct new ones based on common social elements (Berger et Luckmann, 1986). Aside from these individual human experiences, whereby everyone learns how to construct themselves, accept themselves and open themselves to others, the dimension of

sharing, concerning all the aspects of high school life (education, activities, leisure, etc.) remains a lever in the construction of the adolescents' identity. This reciprocal stimulation contributes to making the students evolve and aim for other aspirations or experiences.

Furthermore, boarding schools, in their organization and their dynamics propose but also impose a framework that allows for the structuring of these "slices of life" under the permanent watch of the supervising and teaching personnel, who look after the positive evolution of the students they are entrusted with. Each, on his or her own level, whether involving friendly or institutional relationships, plays an emancipatory role in the student's personal path. A more or less refined maturation process takes place in contact with others and in the projects undertaken by the boarders towards themselves as well as towards others. Gradually, self-confidence develops and the process of emancipation takes shape.

This gain in autonomy occurs in two stages. The first is located in the parental sphere, with the will to make one's own decisions, to assert one's choices and build one's own set of references resulting both from the family legacy and the juvenile culture established in boarding school. The second emancipation stage happens through the development of the student's concrete awareness of his or her environment and the stakes entailed in entering their future working life.

We could thus maintain, in view of this analysis, that while boarding school offers the milestones for the students' possible emancipation, it is up to them to embrace it not as an obstacle to be overcome but as an opportunity to spread their wings for a better control over their entrance into their working lives. However, depending on the personalities of the parties concerned, seeing boarding school as a preparation for life remains a somewhat delicate proposition.

This punctual survey only aims to report on the reality of a specific structure at a given moment. It doesn't claim that it can be generalized and is closely connected to the public of adolescents met in these predefined school contexts. Despite this, we may put forward the hypothesis that whatever the experience in the framework of a boarding school, it offers, for the adolescent, a confrontation with another environment and other references than those long established within the family cocoon. The boarding schools' structure, at once standardizing and emancipating, leads boarders to elaborate references points that are their own and to come to terms with their present and future choices. In any case, this experience leaves its mark. Couldn't we therefore see in it the beginnings of a continuous learning process in the construction of the self to comprehend one's future life?

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