LITERACY IN FRANCE

COUNTRY REPORT

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in France is one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and has 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries[1]. ELINET aims to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. The reports are based (wherever possible) on available, internationally comparable performance data, as well as reliable national data provided (and translated) by our partners.

ELINET continues the work of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLG) which was established by the European Commission in January 2011 and reported in September 2012[2]. All country reports produced by ELINET use a common theoretical framework which is described here: "ELINET Country Reports – Frame of Reference"[3].

The Country Reports about Children and Adolescents are organised around the three recommendations of the HLG´s literacy report:

- Creating a literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity[4]).

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases we published separate **Long Reports** for specific age groups (Children / Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups. Additionally, for all 30 countries, we published **Short Reports** covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports. These reports are accompanied by a collection of good practice examples which cover all age groups and policy areas as well. These examples refer to the **European Framework of Good Practice in Raising Literacy Levels;** both are to be found in the section "Good Practice"[5].

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[1] For more information about the network and its activities see: www.eli-net.eu.
[2] In the following, the final report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referenced as "HLG report". This report can be downloaded under the following link: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf.
[3] See: http://www.eli-net.eu/research/country-reports/.
[4] "Equity" was added by ELINET.
[5] See: http://www.eli-net.eu/good-practice/.

2 Executive Summary

Schooling in metropolitan France and its overseas departments is centralised, and is for the most part delivered under the aegis of the Department for National Education, Higher Education and Research. Primary school resourcing, from physical infrastructure to staffing, is the responsibility of municipalities. In the secondary sector, resourcing is the responsibility of departments (regional subdivisions) in the case of lower secondary schools, and of regional authorities (*académies*) in the case of upper secondary schools; an exception is provision of digital services, responsibility for which is shared between regions and central government for the whole secondary sector.

Compulsory primary education begins at around age 6 and spans five years; pre-school education is essentially universal for 3-5 year olds, and is currently being actively promoted for those 2-year-olds considered to be disadvantaged. Compulsory secondary education spans five years, the first four of which are spent in a lower secondary school (*collège*) and the final year in an upper secondary school (*lycée*) or centre for vocational education. The majority of students continue their education beyond the compulsory phase, spending another year or two studying for qualifications before entering higher education, further training or the world of work.

In keeping with many other countries around the world, France is concerned about ensuring equality of educational access and opportunity for all individuals, irrespective of their background, needs or aspirations. The country currently benefits from a framework for teaching and learning (*socle commun*) that spans education from pre-school through the primary years and on to the end of secondary education, and a well-developed system of early screening, support provision, and ongoing system evaluation.

Students' literacy attainment

France participated in all three of the primary sector reading surveys, carried out in 2001, 2006 and 2011, by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) within its Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and in all the secondary-sector reading surveys carried out since 2000 by the OECD within its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). As a result, the reading attainment of French students at ages 10 and 15 can be set in an international context, complementing broader literacy achievement information furnished by the country's successive national assessment programmes.

Over the three PIRLS surveys of 2001, 2006 and 2011, average student performance in France was essentially stable, at around 10-15 points below the average of the participating EU countries (whose number increased from 14 to 24 over the period). While performance in France was broadly similar across reading purposes (literary versus informational) it was uneven across reading processes, with a higher mean score on 'retrieve and inference' than on 'interpret, integrate and evaluate'. In this sense France is unusual compared with most other countries, where performance tended to be even across all subscales.

While the average reading test performance of French 15-year-olds in the PISA surveys has fluctuated slightly over the period (2000-2012), it has always been above the average of participating EU countries by 10-15 points. The performance spread for French students has also been higher than that for the EU countries on average, with proportionally more students in the high-performing PISA bands and similar proportions in the lowest performing bands.

In PISA 2009 reading literacy was the principal focus in the survey. Although based on rather small subsamples in the case of students with an immigrant background, the reading performance gap between native students and those with an immigrant background was higher in France than in EU countries on average, as was the performance gap between those students who always spoke the language of the test at home and those who did not.

As has been the case in many countries around the world, at both ages 10 and 15 girls produced significantly better reading performances than boys in all surveys, complementing national assessment findings for both reading and writing in the primary and secondary sectors. France has also evidenced a strong socioeconomic gap in performance, for reading in the international surveys and for reading and writing in national assessment surveys.

Policy initiatives regarding literacy

Elinet country reports focus on three major policy areas:

1) Creating a more literate environment
2) Improving the quality of teaching
3) Increasing participation, inclusion and equity.

The French Government has launched numerous initiatives over the past decade to address each of these areas where weaknesses have been apparent. Among the most important initiatives as far as developing literacy skills is concerned must be the introduction of the *socle commun*, the framework for teaching and learning, with its high emphasis on literacy and numeracy, among other aspects of educational development. At every level of education, all teachers are required to support the development of knowledge, skills and personal attributes in the key areas addressed in the framework.

Creating a more literate environment

Compared with their peers in many other EU countries, French students in general benefit from relatively good literacy environments in their homes and schools. The one area that continues to need strengthening is the digital environment in schools, in particular in primary and lower secondary schools. A very recent national priority is the provision of digital learning resources to help ensure that all students and teachers in every school throughout the country can benefit from the potential of technology to support learning and teaching. Resource provision alone, however, will not guarantee the ultimate aim of effective use of the new resource for improving student learning and attainment. In common with many other countries in Europe and elsewhere, there is an urgent need for the provision of ICT training for teachers at all levels if the widespread provision of digital learning devices is to be exploited effectively to improve student attainment in literacy and other areas. The Government is currently addressing this need also.

Improving the quality of teaching

Teaching at all levels of schooling, including pre-primary schooling, is an all-graduate profession in France, with a Masters degree the minimum requirement. The total time required to qualify as a professional teacher in France is thus five years. A Masters degree is not in itself, however, a guarantee of employment in teaching. During their postgraduate training, intending teachers prepare for competitive recruitment examinations, which are organised on a regional basis for the primary sector and nationally on a subject-by-subject basis for the secondary sector. Preschool teachers are drawn from those individuals who meet the criteria for recruitment into primary teaching, successful

candidates having a choice between primary teaching and preschool teaching. After taking up their first post, all new teachers must satisfactorily complete a probationary year in service before becoming full members of the profession.

Teachers' engagement in CPD is not an obligation, and participation remains relatively low among lower secondary school teachers, both lack of time and absence of incentives cited as explanations. These issues need to be addressed if participation is to increase. In addition, the relevance and quality of the courses on offer must be assured. Priority areas for CPD identified by teachers themselves include the use of ICT in teaching, individualised teaching to address student diversity, and giving advice and future study guidance to students. As far as the development of students' literacy skills is concerned, there is a need to improve the quality and participation rates of CPD targeted at building the literacy expertise, including the digital literacy expertise, of all teachers.

Increasing participation, inclusion and equity

The French Government has launched many programmes and initiatives aimed at increasing participation, inclusion and equity for children and adolescents. Preschool attendance is now universal for 3-5 year-olds, and is actively promoted for 2-year-olds, especially for those children who are considered disadvantaged. Strong support systems are in place for children with special needs and for preschool children with language problems (both issues identified in early screening programmes), as well as for children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school. Efforts continue to try to address the early-developed gender gaps in reading and writing – the rapidly increasing use of digital learning devices in schools is expected incidentally to contribute to this effort.

As a result of various initiatives to address the problem of early school leaving, France's rate of early school leavers has been steadily reducing in recent years, and, at 9% in 2015, has already fallen below the EU's 10% target rate for 2020.

3 General Information on the School System in France

Schooling in metropolitan France and its overseas departments (*Départements d'Outre Mer* – DOM: French Guyana, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Reunion Island and, since 2011, Mayotte) is centralised, and is for the most part delivered under the aegis of the Department for National Education, Higher Education and Research. At the start of the 2014-15 academic year over 15 million individuals in France and its DOM were in the education system, from preschool to higher education, representing almost 25% of the population; well over 12 million pupils were in the school system (for the most recent statistics on every aspect of the system see DEPP 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

Responsibility for the provision of infrastructure and educational resourcing is devolved to a number of different administrative entities for the different school sectors. The primary administrative territorial subdivision in France is the department. In all, there are 96 metropolitan and 5 overseas departments (the DOM). Departments are grouped into regions for some administrative purposes (27 regions at the time of writing, shortly to be reduced to 18 by reorganisation of the current 22 metropolitan regions). Administrative responsibility for academic aspects of education has been devolved to academies, which roughly map to the regions and which are each organised around one or more of the major universities.

The French school system is organised into four major stages (see Figure 3.1): preschool (*école maternelle*), primary (*école élémentaire*), lower secondary (*collège*) and upper secondary (*lycée*).

Figure 3.1: Structure of the French School System
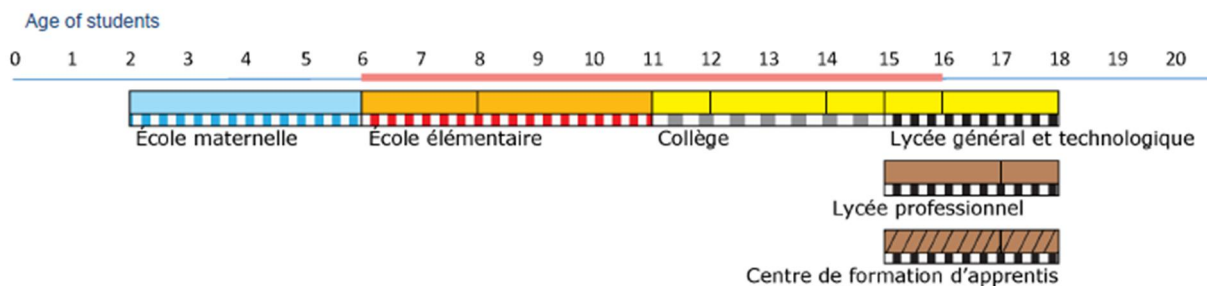
Source: Eurydice 2014

Preschool attendance, while formally optional, is now essentially universal for 3-5 year olds in France, and the participation of 2-year-olds is increasing as a result of targeted government policies. Children begin their compulsory education during the year in which they reach their 6th birthday, at which point they enter the first year of primary school. Following five years of primary education (classes CP, CE1, CE2, CM1, CM2), and at the latest at age 12, they move on into the first year of the four years they will spend in the lower secondary school (classes *6ème, 5ème, 4ème, 3ème*). Compulsory education officially ends when students reach the age of 16, by which time many are in the first year of the upper secondary school (year group *2nde*).

Primary school resourcing, from physical infrastructure to staffing, is the responsibility of municipalities. Secondary school resourcing is the responsibility of departments in the case of lower

secondary schools, and of the regions in the case of upper secondary schools; an exception is provision of digital services, responsibility for which is shared between regions and central government for the whole secondary sector.

A 'common base of knowledge and skills' (*Socle commun de connaissances et de compétences)* was introduced into France in 2006 (MEN 2006), and updated in 2016 (*Socle commun de connaissances, de compétences et de culture* – MEN 2015a). The *socle commun* is essentially a framework for teaching and learning, that identifies the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that every student is expected to have acquired and developed by the end of compulsory education, in order to succeed in future learning and in personal, community and professional life. Seven areas of development are covered, the first five of which are closely aligned to the pre-existing curriculum: French language and literature; a modern foreign language; mathematics, science and technology; ICT; humanities; civics and sociology; autonomy and initiative. Successful completion of compulsory education can be confirmed by the *diplôme national du brevet* ('*brevet'* for short), though possession of a brevet is not a requirement for continuation within the education system. Since 2011 the award of the *brevet* has been dependent on demonstrated mastery of the *socle commun*, as judged by the students' class teachers.

Selection happens for the first time at the end of lower secondary education, when students are orientated to one or other of two types of upper secondary school – the *lycée général et technologique* (the traditional academic route to university) and the *lycée professionnel*, with a more vocational orientation – or to a Centre for apprenticeship training. The upper secondary school offers students a 3-year preparation for the *baccalauréat*, a qualification that has diversified over the past half century, through the introduction of technological and vocational strands, with a consequent widening of accessibility (El Atia 2008).

There are now three types of baccalaureate diploma – academic (*baccalauréat général,* the original), technological (*baccalauréat technologique,* introduced in 1968) and vocational (*baccalauréat professionnel,* introduced in 1985) – each with a number of specialist branches. Of the 650,000+ candidates (two-thirds of the age-group) who currently enter for the baccalaureate each year, around half take the general baccalaureate in one or other of its variants ('scientific', 'literary', 'economic and social'), just under a quarter take the technological baccalaureate and just over a quarter the vocational baccalaureate. Whatever the type of baccalaureate followed, the successful holder in principle has right of access to university. For the prestigious *Grandes Ecoles* the baccalaureate is a minimum admission requirement, prospective students also enrolling in highly selective preparatory courses for two years or more before taking admission tests, which can be written, oral or both, depending on the institution.

4 Literacy performance data for children and adolescents

4.1 Reading performance data: children (PIRLS)

Inaugurated in 2001 and conducted every five years, PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) is a sample-based assessment of students' reading achievement at around age 10 (fourth grade in most participating countries, CM1 in France) organized by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). A survey was administered in 35 countries in 2001, 45 education systems in 2006, and 50 in 2011. PIRLS assesses different purposes for reading (literary and informational) and different reading processes (retrieve explicit information, make inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements). Both multiple-choice and open-ended questions are used.

Combining newly-developed reading assessment passages and questions each year with a selection of secure assessment passages and questions from previous surveys allows for measurement of change over time. PIRLS also examines national policies, curricula and practices related to literacy in participating countries, and includes a set of questionnaires for students, parents/caregivers, teachers, and school principals to investigate the experiences that young children have at home and at school in learning to read, in particular their attitudes and motivation towards reading.

For all PIRLS data used in this report, detailed tables for all participating countries in ELINET are provided, together with the EU averages (ELINET Appendix D: PIRLS 2006 Data). Note that the EU average fluctuates depending on the cycle and the number of participating EU countries – it has been computed across 14 countries in 2001 and 21 in 2006.

4.1.1 Overall reading performance

Students in France (year group CM1) achieved an overall mean reading score of 520 in PIRLS 2011, below the average of the 24 European countries that participated in the survey that year (Table 4.1); just four countries among the EU-24 (Spain, Belgium (FR), Romania and Malta) had significantly lower mean scores than France. Performance in France was broadly similar across reading purposes (Literary, Informational). However, in the case of Reading processes, students in France achieved a higher mean score on Retrieve and Inference (528) than on Interpret, Integrate & Evaluate (512) (ELINET Appendix C, Tables A2-A5). This profile of performance is unusual, as, across most EU-24 countries, performance was at about the same level on the content and process subscales.

Table 4.1: Overall Performance in PIRLS 2011 – France and EU-24 Average

	Overall Reading– Mean Score
France	**520**
EU-24	535

Bold indicates a statistically significant difference between the country and the EU-24 average.

Performance in PIRLS is reported against five attainment benchmarks: Advanced, High, Intermediate, Low and below Low). In France, 25% of students performed at or below the Low benchmark on overall reading (Table 4.2). This is higher than the EU average of 20%. In France, 5% of students achieved at the Advanced benchmark. This is below the EU average of 9%.

Table 4.2: Performance by Overall PIRLS Reading Benchmarks 2011: Percentages of Pupils – France and EU-24 Average

	Below 400	400-475 Low	475-550 Intermediate	550-625 High	Above 625 Advanced
France	5	20	41	29	5
EU-24	5	15	36	35	9

The difference between the scores of students at the 90th and 10th percentiles in France – 175 points – is in line with the corresponding EU-24 average of 180 points.

Table 4.3: Spread of Achievement –10th, 90th Percentiles, and Difference between 90th and 10th Percentiles on Overall Reading – France and EU-24 Average

	10th Percentile	90th Percentile	Mean Score Difference 90th-10th
France	429	605	**175**
EU-24	441	621	**180**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Over the three surveys of 2001, 2006 and 2011 average student performance in France, like that across the EU-24, was essentially stable (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4: Performance 2001-2011 (Overall Scale) – France and EU-24 Average

	2001	2006	Change (2006-2001)	2006	2011	Change (2011-2006)	2001	2011	Change (2011-2001)
France	525	522	-3	522	520	-2	525	520	-5
EU Average*	537	534	-3	534	535	-2	537	535	-2

* The EU average is across 14 participating countries in 2001, 21 in 2006 and 24 in 2011.

4.1.2 Subgroup performance differences

Parents' educational achievement

Students in France whose parents attended University or Higher achieved a mean score (561) that was some 88 points higher than students whose parents completed Lower Secondary or below (473) (Table 4.5). The average difference across the EU-24 was 76 points, suggesting a slightly stronger association between parents' educational level and student performance in France.

Table 4.5: Percentages of Parents Whose Highest Level of Education was Lower Secondary, and Percentages who Finished University or Higher

Level of Education	Lower Secondary or Below		University or Higher		Difference (Univ or Higher – Lower Sec)
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
France	9	473	30	561	**88**
EU-24	18	495	30	571	**76**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Principal language spoken at home

In France, 78% of students reported that they always spoke the language of the PIRLS reading test at home – in line with the corresponding EU-24 Average of 80% (Table 4.6). Twenty-two percent reported that they sometimes or never spoke the language of the test at home. The difference in achievement between pupils in France reporting that they always or sometimes/never spoke the language of the test at home was 16 scale points – 10 points lower than the corresponding EU-24 average difference of 26 points.

Table 4.6: Percentages of Students Reporting that They Always or Sometimes/Never Spoke the Language of the PIRLS test at Home, and Associated Mean Score Differences – France and EU-24 Average

Language of the Test Spoken at Home	Always		Sometimes /Never		Mean Score Difference (Always – Sometimes/Never
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
France	78	524	22	508	**16**
EU-24	80	541	20	519	**26**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Gender

In 2011, 10-year-old girls in France achieved a mean score on overall reading that was only marginally higher, at 5 points, than that of their male peers. The difference was less than half the EU-24 average difference of 12 points (Table 4.7). Over time, the gender gap in France might appear to have reduced.

Table 4.7: Trends in Performance by Gender 2001-2011 (Overall Scale) – France and EU Average

	France			EU Average*		
	Girls	Boys	Girls – Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls – Boys
2011	523	518	5	541	529	**12**
2006	527	516	**11**	541	528	**13**
2001	531	520	**11**	545	528	**17**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold;** * The EU average is across 14 participating countries in 2001, 21 in 2006 and 24 in 2011.

Attitudes to Reading

In 2011, there was a difference of 63 points between the top and bottom quartiles of the 'Like Reading' scale in France (Table 4.8). On average across the EU-24, the difference between students in the top and bottom quarters of the Like Reading scale was 52 points, suggesting a slightly stronger association between liking reading and reading performance in France.

Table 4.8: Mean Overall Reading Scores of Students in the Top and Bottom Quartiles of the PIRLS Like Reading Scale – France and EU-24 Average

Like Reading	Top Quartile	Bottom Quartile	Mean Score Difference(Q4-Q1)
France	556	493	**63**
EU-24	563	511	**52**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**

Students in France in the top quarter of the 'Confidence in Reading' scale achieved a mean score (554) that was some 76 points higher than students in the bottom quarter (478) (Table 4.9). The average difference across the EU-24 was 80 points, indicating a similar association between Confidence and performance as in France.

Table 4.9: Mean Overall Reading Scores of Students in the Top and Bottom Quartiles of the PIRLS Confidence in Reading Scale – France and EU-24 Average

Confidence in Reading	Top Quartile	Bottom Quartile	Mean Score Difference (Q4-Q1)
France	554	478	**76**
EU-24	570	490	**80**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**

4.2   Reading performance data: adolescents (PISA)

The sample-based Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) led by the OECD[6] assesses the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students every three years in all OECD countries and in a number of partner countries and jurisdictions. Since 2000, PISA has been testing students in reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy. Information is also gathered on students' backgrounds, and on practices, motivational attributes and metacognitive strategies related to reading when reading is the major domain (2000 and 2009).

The PISA tests assess different aspects of reading literacy – retrieve information, interpret, reflect and evaluate on texts – and use a variety of texts – continuous (prose) and non-continuous (texts including graphs, tables, maps...). About half of the questions are multiple-choice, the other half open-ended (short or constructed answers). Results are reported on scales defining different levels of proficiency ranging from 1 (low performing) to 6 (high performing). Level 2 is considered as the level all 15 year-olds should reach, to enable them to participate effectively to society. Since 2015, PISA has been administered on computers only in most participating countries.

In the tables displaying performances and trends (section 4.2.1), data from the cycles in which reading was the major domain (2000 and 2009), and from the most recent cycle (2012), are reported. With a single exception, 2009 data are used in the section focusing on subgroup performance gaps, since variables focusing on reading-related outcomes, such as attitudes and metacognition, were not addressed in PISA 2012. For all PISA data used in this report, the EU average fluctuates depending on the cycle and the number of participating EU countries – it has been computed across 21 countries in 2000, 26 in 2009 and 27 in 2012.

4.2.1 Overall reading performance

France has participated in PISA since 2000. It is therefore possible to describe the change in reading performance over twelve years on average, according to different reader characteristics. In 2012 (OECD 2014a), France performed 16 points (equivalent to almost a half-year of schooling) above the average for the 27 European countries that participated in the PISA survey that year (Table 4.10). France's performance was in fact stable across the surveys of 2000 to 2012 (Table 4.11).

Table 4.10: Reading performance in PISA 2012 – France and EU-27 Average

	Overall Reading Mean Score
France	**505**
EU-27	489

Bold indicates a statistically significant difference between the country and the EU-27 average.

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[6] See: http://www.pisa.OECD.org.

Table 4.11: Trends in reading performance – Mean Scores in PISA 2000-2012

	2000	2009	2012	Change 2000–2009	Change 2009–2012	Change 2000–2012
France	505	496	505	-9	10	1
EU average*	489	486	489	-3	**5**	3

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold**; *The EU average is across 21 participating countries in 2000, 26 in 2009 and 27 in 2012.

In France the spread of achievement in 2012 was significantly higher than in the EU-27 countries on average (Table 4.12); the proportion of low performers was in line with the EU-27 figure whereas high performers were in greater proportion (Table 4.13).

Table 4.12: Spread of achievement. Difference between 10th and 90th percentiles on the reading scale, all students – PISA 2012

	Score diff.
France	**281**
EU-27	251

Significant differences between the country and EU-27 in **bold**

Table 4.13: Percentage of low-performing (below level 2) and high-performing (levels 5/6) students - PISA 2012

	% Below level 2	% Levels 5 and 6
France	19	**13**
EU-27	20	7

Statistically significant differences between the country and EU-27 in **bold**

4.2.2 Subgroup performance differences

Some of the questionnaire information relating to reading was only gathered in those survey years when reading was a major domain, i.e. 2000 and 2009. The majority of tables in this section present data from PISA 2009.

Socioeconomic status

In France, the gap in reading performance according to the students' socioeconomic background was higher than the European average. This gap of 110 score points (Table 4.14) is equivalent to almost three years of schooling.

Table 4.14: Difference in reading performance between bottom and top national quarters of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status – PISA 2009

	Mean score difference
France	**110**
EU-26	**89**

Statistically significant differences in mean scores in **bold**

Gender

The gender difference in reading performance in France in 2009 was similar to the EU average, girls' performance being significantly higher than boys' performance, by 40 and 44 points, respectively (Table 4.15). The picture remained the same in 2012, whereas in 2000 the gender gaps were smaller in France and across the EU group, to similar extents.

Table 4.15: Reading performance by gender – PISA 2000-2012

	France			EU Average*		
	Girls	Boys	Difference Girls – Boys	Girls	Boys	Difference Girls – Boys
2000	519	490	**29**	506	473	**33**
2009	515	475	**40**	507	464	**43**
2012	527	483	**44**	511	468	**43**

Significant differences between boys and girls in **bold**; * The EU average is across 21 participating countries in 2000, 26 in 2009 and 27 in 2012.

Migration

In France, the percentage of students with an immigrant background at the time of the 2009 survey was 13%. The performance gap between native students and those with an immigrant background was higher in France than the EU average, at 61 points (equivalent to one and a half years of schooling) versus 38 points (Table 4.16).

Table 4.16: Percentage of students and reading performance by immigrant status – PISA 2009

	Native students		Students with an immigrant background (first- or second-generation)		Difference Native - Others
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
France	87	505	13	444	**61**
EU-26	92	490	8	452	**38**

Statistically significant differences between native and immigrant-background students in **bold**

Language spoken at home

In France, the performance gap between students who spoke the test language at home and those who did not (7% of the students) is higher, at 72 score points, than the EU-27 average of 54 points (Table 4.17). It is equivalent to more than one and a half years of schooling.

Table 4.17: Percentage of students and reading performance, by language spoken at home – PISA 2012

	Spoke test language at home		Spoke another language at home		Difference according to language spoken at home
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
France	93	505	7	433	**72**
EU-27	87	494	13	441	54

Significant differences according to the language spoken at home in **bold**.

Engagement and metacognition

In France, there was a gap of 124 score points - equivalent to three years of schooling - between students reporting to be highly engaged in reading (top quarter), and those reporting as being poorly engaged (bottom quarter) (Table 4.18). Not surprisingly, students who reported being highly engaged in reading performed better in the PISA reading tests. The difference between the most and the least engaged readers in France is higher than the EU-26 average: 124 versus 99 points, respectively.

Table 4.18: Mean reading scores between students poorly engaged and highly engaged in reading – PISA 2009

	Low quarter (poorly engaged)	Top quarter (highly engaged)	Difference Top quarter – Low quarter
France	436	559	**124**
EU-26	444	543	**99**

Significant differences according to the level of reading engagement in **bold**.

In France, there was a gap of 108 score points - equivalent to two and a half years of schooling- between the students who knew which strategies are the most efficient to understand and remember a text, and those who had only a limited knowledge. On average, in the EU-26, the gap is somewhat lower, at 98 score points (Table 4.19). This important difference reflects how closely reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading strategies are associated.

Table 4.19: Mean reading scores between students in the low and top quarters of understanding and remembering strategies – PISA 2009

	Low quarter (low awareness)	Top quarter (high awareness)	Difference Top quarter – Low quarter
France	442	549	**108**
EU-26	433	531	**98**

Significant differences according to the degree of awareness of understanding and remembering strategies in **bold**.

In France, there is a gap of 117 score points – equivalent to three years of schooling – between the students who knew which strategies are the most efficient to summarize a text, and those who had only a limited knowledge of that. On average, in the EU-26, the gap was somewhat lower, at 90 score points (Table 4.20). This difference reflects how closely reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading strategies are linked.

Table 4.20: Mean reading scores between students in the low and top quarters of summarizing strategies – PISA 2009

	Low quarter (low awareness)	Top quarter (high awareness)	Difference Top quarter – Low quarter
France	429	547	**117**
EU-26	440	530	**90**

Significant differences according to the degree of awareness of summarising strategies in **bold**.

4.3 Literacy performance data from national assessment programmes (CEDRE, LOLF, JDC)

France has a long history of large-scale assessment, predating the country's participation in PISA and PIRLS, with an expansion of activity over the past 10 years accompanied by many evolutions in purposes and models (Daussin et al. 2011, pp.140-141; Trosseille & Rocher 2015). Most of the survey programmes have focused, and continue to focus, on literacy (often both reading and writing), either alone or in company with numeracy. For example, from the late 1980s until the late 2000s the country benefited from a 'diagnostic' survey programme, in which cohort testing in literacy and numeracy took place at the beginning of the third year in primary school (CE2, Grade 3) and at the beginning of the first year of lower secondary school (6ème, Grade 6). One of the aims was to provide attainment information for the benefit of school inspectors and receiving class teachers. The inexorable international move towards greater outcomes-based accountability in education, however, saw the demise of this particular assessment programme in favour of the now familiar end-of-year model (Trosseille & Rocher 2015). The LOLF (*loi organique relative aux lois de finances*) attainment survey programme, whose principal aim is to provide indicators of educational system effectiveness in terms of the proportion of pupils at a stage demonstrating mastery of basic skills in literacy and numeracy, was ushered in towards the end of the 2006-7 school year (see, for example, DEPP 2012, pp.50-51), with testing at CM2 (the end of primary school, Grade 5) and 3ème (end of lower secondary school, Grade 9).

More recently, a new 'LOLF' model has been launched that is intended to monitor achievement with more direct reference to skill domains 1 and 3 of the current *socle commun,* i.e. 'proficiency in the French language' and 'fundamentals of mathematics, science and technology'. Following very large baseline surveys carried out in 2012 and 2013 (DEPP 2014, pp.48-49), involving tens of thousands of sample students, surveys are to be conducted at key points in schooling, taken in rotation on a 3-year cycle (DEPP 2015b, p.222). Thus, 2014 saw testing in the lower primary school, at the end of CE1 (DEPP 2015a, pp.48-49; Garcia et al. 2015), in 2015 attention shifted to the beginning of the lower secondary school (6ème), and 2016 focuses on the end of the lower secondary school (3ème).

Meanwhile, a programme of sample-based subject assessment that began in 2003 continues (e.g. Colmant et al. 2011). Known as CEDRE (*Le cycle des évaluations disciplinaires réalisées sur échantillons*), the programme assesses achievement at the end of primary school and at the end of the lower secondary school in several curriculum subjects and subject groups, each on a 6-year cycle (which, post-2012, has become a 5-year cycle): French; mathematics; modern languages; civics, history and geography; and experimental science.

In addition to these ongoing monitoring programmes, repeat surveys in language and mathematics have also recently been conducted to compare skills acquisition over a relatively long period of time (e.g. 14 years) at the same stage of schooling. Like the now defunct diagnostic survey programme, these have taken place at the beginning of particular school years rather than at their end, and have repeated as many of the tasks and items originally administered in that earlier programme that remain relevant in terms of today's curriculum. An example is a sample-based survey undertaken at the beginning of CE2 in 2013 using tasks and items originally used in 1999 at that stage (Andreu et al. 2014).

Finally, a number of longitudinal surveys ('panel studies') have been organised, to explore specific performance issues. The latest such study (Ben Ali & Rourc'h 2015), which saw the same students tested in 2007 (in 6ème) and tested again in 2011 (in 3ème), was designed to explore whether performance gaps in literacy and mathematics associated with socioeconomic differences evolved as pupils moved through the lower secondary school.

The information in this section is taken principally from France's two current system monitoring programmes, *viz.* CEDRE and the LOLF indicators programme, both of which concern compulsory education, and also the JDC literacy testing programme for 17-18 year olds.

CEDRE (*Le cycle des évaluations disciplinaires réalisées sur échantillons*), one of France's current sample-based national assessment programmes, was launched in 2003 to monitor pupil attainment with respect to a number of major curriculum areas, with each area assessed on a 6-year cycle (recently changed to a 5-year cycle). CEDRE focuses on pupil achievement at the end of primary schooling (CM2) and at the end of lower secondary schooling (3ème) in metropolitan France. The subjects assessed are French, mathematics, modern foreign languages, civics, science, history and geography. The majority of test items are multiple-choice (all were in earlier surveys in the series), and, as in PIRLS and PISA, IRT is the technical methodology used for data analysis. Unlike PIRLS and PISA, whose arbitrary reporting scale has a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100, CEDRE reports attainment on a scale with a mean of 250 and a standard deviation of 50. An artefact of the scaling methodology used in CEDRE, PISA and PIRLS is that the scale score distribution is approximately Normal, i.e. bell-shaped.

To maximise interpretability, particularly for over-time reporting, students are classified into groups, or performance levels, on the basis of 'benchmark' scale scores, again following the general model of PIRLS and PISA. Five performance bands were initially identified for reporting purposes in 2003, when reading comprehension featured. The lowest performance band was established to contain the lowest scoring 15% of tested pupils, on the basis of prior knowledge from various earlier surveys in the field that indicated this to be an appropriate percentage, serving to identify children with reading difficulties (Gibert & Pastor 2007, p.54); this group was further subdivided to distinguish between children with reading difficulties and those with severe reading difficulties. It was decided that the upper band should capture the top scoring 10% of pupils ('complete mastery'), as was originally the choice in PIRLS

and PISA. These initial decisions served to determine cut scores (boundary scale scores, or 'benchmarks') for these groups. Three other performance bands were determined by dividing the intermediate score scale into equal widths. As a result, CEDRE surveys report, among other things, the proportions of pupils falling into one or other of six attainment bands or groups. Again as in PIRLS and PISA, a review of group performances on different items permitted the production of 'performance descriptors' ostensibly characterising the nature of group capabilities.

The first CEDRE surveys in 2003 focused on the assessment of reading comprehension, aural comprehension and oral skills (Gibert et al. 2004). For purposes of task development and attainment reporting, a hierarchical set of subskills (in terms of assumed demand) was identified for reading and aural comprehension:

- Retrieve explicit information from the text
- Retrieve implicit information from the text
- Arrive at a logical conclusion on the basis of two given assertions
- Analyse the source material to extract the essential information
- Synthesise a document, identify the theme, select an appropriate summary.

Tasks took the familiar form of an information source suitable for use with the target age-group, along with a set of associated comprehension questions. The information source might be a piece of continuous text, or a collection of smaller sources, including, among other possibilities, short texts, diagrams, maps, photos, tables, charts. Recognising the wide applicability of literacy skills, each comprehension task was set in one or other of six different contexts: literature, mathematics, science, history, geography, 'everyday life' (Gibert et al. 2004). For examples of tasks and items from the first primary survey see Gibert & Pastor (2007). Repeat surveys at the two key school stages were undertaken in 2009, with a third set of surveys having taken place in 2015 (reports expected in 2016). In each survey around 5000-6000 pupils/students were tested.

4.3.1 CEDRE performance findings: children

Overall reading performance

The mean score of 250 set for reading comprehension in 2003 barely chznged by 2009 (Colmant et al. 2011), indicating stability in attainment at the end of primary schooling over the 6-year period. Of the subskills identified for exploration, information retrieval was the least demanding skill while 'analysis' proved to be the most demanding, with the lowest average item facilities in all six attainment groups. This result is consistent with the findings reported by PIRLS for children one year younger (see Section 4.1.1, and Colmant & Dos Santos 2008). As far as the nature of the information source is concerned, i.e. one continuous text as opposed to short texts, diagrams, maps, and so on, attainment was generally lower for continuous texts in all attainment groups. Both these findings were replicated in a 2006 CEDRE survey of history, geography and civics, which aimed to evaluate general language skills applied in the different disciplines as well as specific disciplinary knowledge (Pastor & Brun 2007). Aural comprehension performance was generally higher than reading comprehension, the gap increasing the lower the general attainment group.

Subgroup performance comparisons

Socioeconomic status

Children in state maintained schools situated in educational priority zones (*zones d'education prioritaire*, ZEP)[7] performed less well than those in other state maintained schools or in private schools: 35% of the 'ZEP children' were in the lowest two attainment groups in 2003 compared with 13% overall. In a later more in-depth secondary analysis of the 2003 survey data (Gibert & Pastor 2007) strong relationships were again established between reading attainment and socioeconomic background (notably school catchment area and father's occupation). The picture in 2009 was essentially unchanged (Colmant et al. 2011).

Gender differences

The question of possible gender differences in reading was not addressed in the 2003 survey report. However, the 2009 report noted statistically significant gender differences in favour of girls in both the 2003 and the 2009 surveys (Colmant et al. 2011), replicating the PIRLS gender gap in direction (Section 4.1.2). The overall gender gap was 6-7 scale score points. In the CEDRE primary sector surveys of English and German written and oral comprehension, which took place in 2004 and 2010, girls again showed the higher performances, in both languages (Beuzon et al. 2013).

Grade retention

Performance levels were lower among children who had been constrained to repeat one or more years during their primary school careers (*redoublement*) compared with those who had not, presumably reflecting the fact that children are kept back to repeat years because of poor performance in their original year group.

4.3.2 CEDRE performance findings: adolescents

Overall reading performance

According to the survey findings (Bourny et al. 2010), reading attainment at the end of the lower secondary school fell between 2003 and 2009: the mean scaled score of 250 in 2003 fell to 245 in 2009, a modest 5-point difference but statistically significant nonetheless. The decrease was not evenly represented across the score distribution, however. The estimated population proportion in group 5, the highest attaining group, fell from 10% in 2003 to just over 7% in 2009, while those in group 0, the lowest attaining group, rose from 2% in 2003 to 4% in 2009 (see Figure 4.3.1). Differences in proportions in other groups over the period were small and not significant. Subskill attainment varied in the same direction as reported for primary children. Information retrieval was the best demonstrated subskill, with analysis and synthesis the least well demonstrated.

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[7] Educational priority zones were deprived areas in which schools were given extra financial and other resource support by government in order to help address poor pupil attainment and certain social problems.

Figure 4.3.1: Distribution of pupils over attainment groups in 2003 and 2009 (3ème: end of lower secondary school)
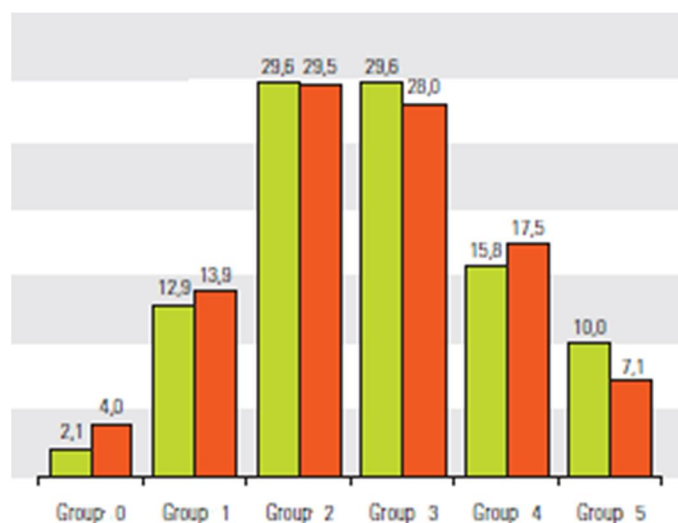
Source: Adapted from DEPP (2012), p.53

Subgroup performance comparisons

Socioeconomic status

Pupils in maintained schools located in educational priority zones performed significantly lower in both years than their counterparts in other schools, whether state or private. Moreover, their average reading attainment fell significantly between 2003 and 2009, by 12 points (from 235 to 223), whereas the average attainment of their peers in non-deprived areas barely changed (4-5 points lower in each case). These findings are in line with the PISA finding that the socioeconomic gap in pupil attainment in France is particularly large compared with other EU countries (Section 4.2.2).

Gender

Both boys and girls produced lower average performance scores in 2009 compared with 2003, both falls reaching statistical significance. Nevertheless, girls still produced on average better overall performances than boys, and in both years there were proportionally more boys than girls in groups 0 and 1 combined (around 16% for boys versus 12% for girls in 2003, and over 20% for boys versus just over 15% for girls in 2009). Again, these findings are in line with PISA results, with girls significantly outperforming boys in reading on average (Section 4.2.2), and with proportionally more boys than girls in the lowest performance groups.

Grade retention

The proportion of pupils with a history of grade retention was lower in 2009 than in 2003 (28% versus 34%), reflecting government policies to reduce the practice, and proportionally more of those held back were in the lowest performance group (just over 9% in 2009 compared with under 5% in 2003). In line with this, statistically significant differences of 40 scale points were recorded in 2009, compared with 30 points in 2003, between the average attainment of pupils who had never repeated a school year and those who had done so. These persisting attainment differences support a view that grade repetition is not an effective strategy for improving attainment. The highest attainment was shown by pupils who had never been held back to repeat a year.

Migration

The average performances of three groups defined on the basis of immigration status (not reported for primary pupils) were compared in both years. The groups are 'native' pupils (i.e. those born in France of French-born parents – almost 90% of the sample), '1st generation immigrants' (pupils born abroad, with parents also born abroad) and '2nd generation immigrants' (pupils born in France of parents born abroad). In 2003, 1st and 2nd generation pupils produced essentially equal average performance scores, around 25 points lower than native pupils. In 2009, the overall average performance of 2nd generation immigrants remained stable, whereas that of 1st generation immigrant pupils fell significantly, by 17 points (from 228 to 211), as did that of the native pupils, by 6 points (from 254 to 248). One of the most striking comparisons is that while in 2003 just 7% of 1st generation immigrant pupils were estimated to be in the lowest performing group, by 2009 this proportion had risen to over 16%. PISA similarly reported performance gaps in favour of native pupils (Section 4.2.2).

4.3.3 LOLF performance findings: children and adolescents

The LOLF (*loi organique relative aux lois de finances*) performance indicators programme began life in the late-2000s with annual cohort testing in reading and numeracy throughout metropolitan France and the DOM. Among other purposes, the programme was intended to furnish system outcomes information for inclusion in a wide set of national indicators covering a broad range of government-financed activity. Sample-based 'basic skills' surveys took place from 2007 until 2012 at the end of each of two stages in schooling: CM2, the end of primary schooling, and 3ème, the end of lower secondary schooling. Testing took place in March, with pupils undertaking two-hour tests in each domain, generally in four blocks of 20-30 minutes. Scripts were marked centrally, and item response modelling used as the underpinning design and analysis methodology.

Following this 6-year experience, a new remodelled LOLF programme was designed to be more closely tied to the *socle commun* (see Section 3.2), focusing specifically on competence 1 ('mastery of the French language' – for the most part synonymous with 'reading literacy' in this survey context) and competence 3 ('fundamentals of mathematics, science and technology'). Item response modelling continues to be the choice for data analysis and reporting. Pilot surveys were carried out in 2012-13 in the lower primary school (CE1), and, as before, in the final year of primary schooling and the final year of lower secondary schooling. An important post-trialling change in plan is that the final year of primary school has been replaced with the first year of lower secondary school in the set of key assessment stages, since secondary schools are currently better equipped than primary schools to support online testing. Another difference between the new programme and the old is that regional as well as national results are to be produced at the start of the secondary school, for the benefit of the regional education authorities throughout metropolitan France and the DOM. To enable this, student sample sizes for the surveys at the beginning of the lower secondary school will be of the order of 150,000, in place of the 8000 or so per stage in the old programme. The new programme formally began with a lower primary school (CE1) survey in 2014, with testing in May, followed by a survey in the first year of secondary school (6ème) in 2015, with testing in November. A survey at the end of lower secondary schooling (3ème) in 2016, with testing in May, will complete the initial set. A 3-year cycle for each stage is planned to continue from then on.

Overall reading performance

The results for the annual 'basic skills' surveys of literacy and numeracy at the end of primary schooling and at the end of secondary schooling, conducted in March of the school year over the period 2007-2012, are presented in DEPP 2012 (pp.50-51). While there were inevitable fluctuations in the sample-based survey results from one year to another, the attainment picture for the primary sector over the 6-year period was one of general stability. In the final survey of 2012, around 90% of the tested pupils demonstrated 'mastery' of basic literacy and mathematics skills, by reaching pre-determined criterion cut scores. In the secondary sector the findings were less positive, particularly for literacy, with a mastery rate of 75% compared with well over 85% for numeracy.

In the pilot surveys conducted at these same stages in 2013, within the remodelled LOLF indicators programme, testing took place in May rather than in March, and with new cut score criteria determining 'mastery'. 80% of the tested primary pupils demonstrated mastery for competence 1 (reading literacy) with just over 70% doing so for competence 3 (fundamentals of mathematics, science and technology). At the end of the lower secondary school corresponding figures were just under 80% in each case (DEPP 2014, pp.48-49; DEPP 2015b, pp.220-221). The 2014 survey of pupils in the early primary school produced roughly the same estimated rates of mastery for reading literacy and for fundamentals of mathematics, science and technology, at just over 80% of pupils in each case (DEPP 2015a, pp.48-49; DEPP 2015b, pp.222-223).

Subgroup performance comparisons

Socioeconomic status

In the basic skills surveys of 2007-2012 the best results, in both sectors, were produced by pupils in private schools or in 'regular' state schools: in the primary sector the achievement of pupils in both these school types was essentially the same, while in the secondary sector private school pupils consistently outperformed state school pupils, reflecting known differences in the socioeconomic make-up of the two school groups (when student socioeconomic status is taken into account the average attainment difference between the two types of school disappears). Of some concern is that while performance appeared to be relatively stable across the period for pupils in the private schools and 'regular' state schools, it fell steadily over the six years for pupils in those state schools that were receiving extra financial and other resource support to combat the effects of deprivation. In the 2013 'new indicators' pilot surveys, in both sectors pupils in private schools produced better performances than those in 'regular' state schools, and these in turn again performed better than those in state schools benefitting from extra resource support. Again, socioeconomic differences are relevant here. The same picture emerged in the 2014 survey in the early primary school (CE1).

Gender

In the 2007-2012 basic skills surveys girls outperformed boys on average in literacy, particularly at the end of the lower secondary school, where there was a 14 percentage point difference for 'mastery' in 2012 (82% for girls versus 68% for boys). For mathematics there was essentially no gender gap. Gender differences emerged in both sectors and for both domains in the 2013 *socle commun* surveys. At the end of primary schooling 83% of the girls tested demonstrated mastery of competence 1 (reading literacy) compared with 77% of the boys. The gap was wider at the end of the lower secondary school, with more than 85% of the girls demonstrating mastery compared with under 75% of the boys. For competence 3 (fundamentals of mathematics, science and technology) a small gender gap emerged in

favour of boys in the final primary year (approaching 75% 'mastery' for boys versus just under 70% for girls). At the end of the lower secondary school, however, the gap had reversed to be in favour of the girls, but it was still small, at just over four percentage points. In the lower primary school (CE1, 2014 survey) proportionally more girls than boys demonstrated mastery in reading literacy (85% versus 78%, respectively), whereas success rates were equal for mathematics, science and technology (at 83%).

Grade retention

In all the surveys in both sectors the achievements of pupils who had been held back for at least one school year up to that point (14% of the primary sample and 28% of the secondary sample in 2012) were significantly below those of pupils who were 'on target'. In 2012 the proportions of the 'on target' and the 'late' groups that demonstrated basic skills mastery at the end of primary schooling were 92% and 66%, respectively, for literacy, and 94% and 71% for mathematics. At the end of lower secondary schooling the proportions were similar to those at the end of primary schooling for mathematics, at 95% and 68%, respectively, but were markedly lower for literacy, at 85% and 51%.

In the 2013 surveys at these same two stages under the remodelled LOLF indicators programme, the same large statistically significant achievement gaps emerged between 'on target' and 'late' pupils. Differences were of the order of 40 percentage points for both assessed domains in the final primary year, and around 30 percentage points for both domains in the final year of the lower secondary school, paralleling the findings from the CEDRE surveys of reading comprehension, described in Section 4.3.2. In the 2014 survey in the lower primary school a 30 percentage point difference in mastery rates again emerged for both domains, in favour of the 'on target' pupils.

4.3.4 JDC performance findings: young adults

On reaching the age of 17 all French citizens in metropolitan France and the DOM are obliged to participate in the country's 'Defence and Citizenship Day' (*Journée Défense et Citoyenneté,* JDC), a certificate of participation being a requirement for entry to any state diploma and for application for a driving licence. In addition to learning about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, and being informed about education and career opportunities in the armed forces, the participants are required to take a short reading test. The test comprises three modules: a rapid-response orthographic-phonological correspondence test, a vocabulary test, and a reading comprehension test. Questions are presented on a large communal screen to large groups of participants, who then respond independently using electronic response capture devices. The testing serves to monitor population literacy levels over time for the age group concerned. It also serves to identify those young people who are experiencing serious reading difficulties, and provides an opportunity to guide these individuals to appropriate sources of help.

In 2014 three-quarters of a million young people of French nationality, the great majority of whom were still in full-time education or training, participated in the JDC. The literacy findings were roughly in line with recently preceding years.

Overall reading performance

On the basis of the 2014 testing, just over 80% of the participants were judged to be good readers, just under 10% were 'mediocre', around 5% were 'very weak', with some reading difficulties, and around 4% had such severe reading difficulties that they could be considered to be illiterate (DEPP 2015a, pp.54-55; Vourc'h et al. 2015). The individuals classified as 'illiterate' suffered from extremely

scant vocabulary knowledge and lacked the skills necessary to decipher and to understand written text. Rates of illiteracy were uniformly low across metropolitan France, at 3-4% (2% in Paris), and markedly higher in the DOM, where they ranged from 14% in Reunion Island to almost 50% in Mayotte (DEPP 2015b, p.229).

Subgroup performance comparisons

The proportion of participants with reading difficulties rose in inverse relation to their educational level: from less than 5% among participants holding or currently studying for the general or technological baccalaureate to well over 40% among those who had not studied beyond lower secondary school. The higher the level of education the smaller the gender gap in reading ability; among those young people possessing or studying for a general or technological baccalaureate there was virtually no gender gap in reading ability according to the JDC test, whereas among those who had left formal education after the lower secondary school the gender gap was relatively large (Figure 4.3.2). Males and females performed similarly on the vocabulary knowledge test, but the males were on average less competent than the females when it came to reading comprehension.

Figure 4.3.2: Gender and level of education (% young adults experiencing reading difficulties)
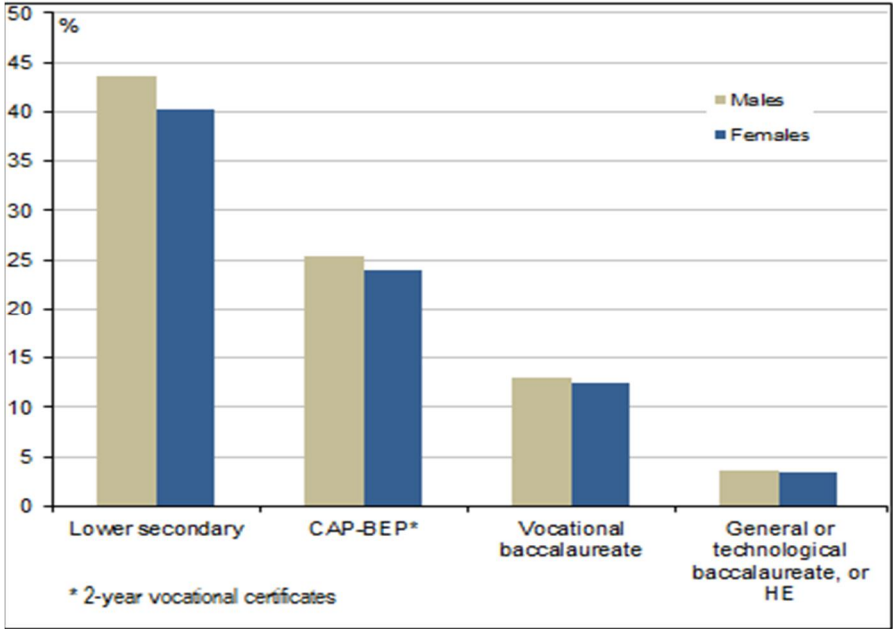
Source: Vourc'h et al. 2015

4.3.5 Research studies: children and adolescents

In addition to the many surveys conducted within France's ongoing system monitoring programmes, survey-based research studies are occasionally conducted to explore in further depth certain issues or policy questions that arise. Some studies are based on repeated (as far as possible) cross-sectional surveys at the same stage of schooling several years apart. Others are longitudinal studies that follow the same sample of children or adolescents through their schooling, testing and retesting them as they progress. Examples of some of these *ad hoc* exploratory studies are offered here.

Cross-sectional 'repeat' surveys: reading and writing

Two recent studies looked at the attainment of pupils in particular stages of schooling 14 years apart. The first focused on pupils just starting primary school (CP - reception class) in 1997 and 2011 (Le Cam et al. 2013), while the second looked at pupils entering CE2 two years later, in 1999 and 2013 (Andreu et al. 2014). The 'repeat' surveys used as many of the items and tasks in reading and numeracy as had been used in the earlier surveys and which remained relevant to the modern-day curriculum: e.g. 38 literacy items and 42 numeracy items for the CE2 study. Testing took place at the beginning of the school year as it had done in the earlier surveys, which had been conducted within the now defunct 'diagnostic' survey programme.

In general, the literacy and numeracy performance of the CP children showed strong and generalised increases over the 14-year period, with performance gaps related to socioeconomic status (parents' occupation and level of education) on both occasions. As far as gender differences are concerned, the girls generally showed greater competence than the boys in literacy and oral language skills, with no gender difference for early numeracy skills. The children tested at the beginning of CE2 either showed no difference in performance between 1999 and 2013, or showed slightly lower performances in certain areas. For example, in literacy, while reading comprehension skills were maintained, performance in spelling and vocabulary were less good in 2013 (the last reported diagnostic survey of 2003 had already revealed weaknesses in writing skills at this stage – Brezillon et al. 2004). In numeracy, most items were slightly less well done in 2013 than in 1999, although subtraction proved unique in showing slightly better performances. The researchers were unable to offer comment on any possible subgroup performance differences related to children's socioeconomic background, as this information was not available to them. Gender differences were in expected directions, with the girls showing the better performances on average than the boys in literacy and the reverse for numeracy.

A third survey-based study explored reading, writing and numeracy (*lire, écrire, compter*) attainment over a 20-year period at the end of the primary school (CM2) in metropolitan France (Rocher 2008). Testing took place in 1987, 1997 and 2007 for reading and writing, and in 1987, 1999 and 2007 for numeracy. Reading comprehension was assessed using eight source texts, each with five short-answer questions attached. Writing skills were assessed on the basis of a short dictation, and a set of 10 sentence completion items. All reasonable attempts were made to ensure the comparability of results from one period of time to another, but there were inevitably some issues that threatened this: among them the need to ensure match of assessment materials to present-day curricula, an unavoidable element of marker subjectivity in the case of the reading comprehension items, sampling strategy differences from one year to another, and so on.

The limitations notwithstanding, the surveys suggested that performance in all three skill domains – reasding comprehension, writing and numeracy – fell significantly over the period. While reading comprehension was stable over the 10-year period 1987-1997, it then fell significantly during the next decade, particularly among the weakest readers. As far as writing is concerned, the average number of lexical, orthographic and morphosyntactic errors made by pupils increased over the 20-year time span. On all three occasions girls were on average more competent than boys for reading comprehension, with a larger gap between the two groups for writing skills. Children who had repeated one or more years in school performed significantly less well as a group than those who were 'on target', and there were strong relationships between test performance and parents' occupation.

Longitudinal surveys: reading and knowledge of language

Moving into secondary education, an interesting longitudinal study involved testing the same large sample of pupils ('the 2007 panel') at the beginning and end of lower secondary school, i.e. in 2007 and 2013, to establish whether initial performance gaps associated with socioeconomic status in any way changed during this 4-year period of compulsory education (Ben Ali & Vourc'h 2015). Five skill areas were included in the study: reading comprehension (short texts), syntactic knowledge (sentence completion items), logical reasoning (using playing cards), mathematics (operations, including mental calculation, word problems, geometry and logic) and disciplinary vocabulary knowledge (vocabulary drawn from school textbooks in French, mathematics, science and technology, earth and life sciences, history, geography). The results revealed a general stability in the performance gap for reading comprehension, syntactic knowledge and logical reasoning over the 4-year period, but an increased gap for mathematics and for disciplinary vocabulary knowledge. There was a particularly strong relationship between disciplinary vocabulary growth and number of books in the home, pupils with fewer than 30 books in the home being particularly disadvantaged (Figure 4.3.3). Unfortunately, the study report offers no information about any possible gender gaps in performance, at either time point.

Figure 4.3.3: Relationship between skill/knowledge improvement and number of books in the home (increases in mean test scores over the 4 years)
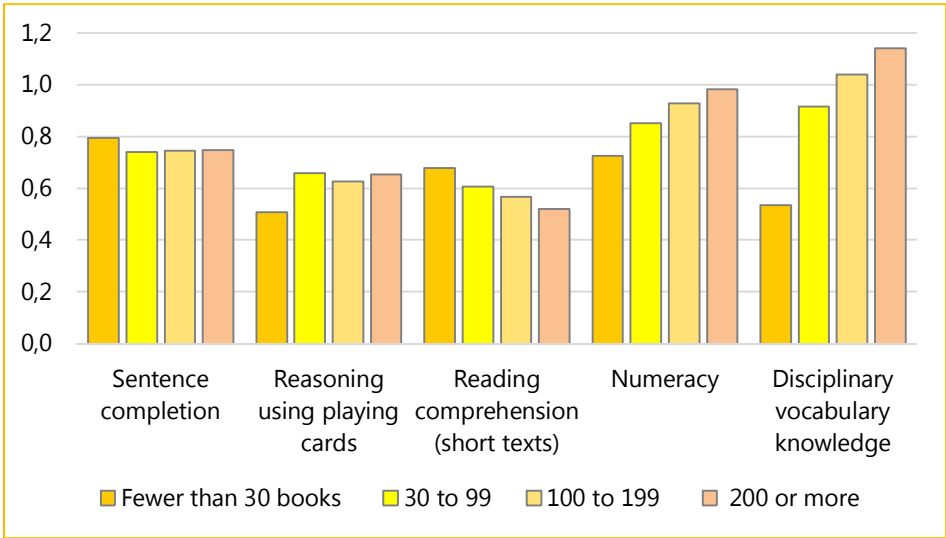
Source: Adapted from Ben Ali & Vourc'h 2015, p.3

5 Policy Areas

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy recommended that all EU Member States should focus on the following areas as they craft their own literacy solutions (HLG 2012, p.38):

1) Creating a more literate environment
2) Improving the quality of teaching
3) Increasing participation, inclusion and equity (the term "equity" was added by ELINET).

The following sections address primarily these three key issues, based on a review of national data up to 2016.

In the interest of cross-country comparison, quantitative and qualitative indicators for which information from international data is available are reported. ELINET Appendix A provides information on criteria for the choice of indicators, and the chosen indicators for the pre-primary age group. ELINET Appendix B a table for each indicator, in which values are included for all the ELINET countries. ELINET Appendix C is derived from the PIRLS 2011 international database, and contains separate tables for all information reported. ELINET Appendix D offers the same information for the PIRLS 2001 and PIRLS 2006 data.

5.1 Creating a literate environment for children and adolescents

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated the following in relation to **creating a more literate environment**:

> Creating a more literate environment will help stimulate a culture of reading, i.e. where **reading for pleasure** is seen as the norm for all children and adults. Such a culture will fuel reading motivation and reading achievement: people who like to read, read more. Because they read more, they read better, and because they read better they read more: a virtuous circle which benefits individuals, families and society as a whole. (HLG 2012, p. 41).

Parents play a central role in children's emergent literacy development. They are the first teachers, and shape children's language and communication abilities and attitudes to reading by being good reading role models, providing reading materials, and reading to the child.

Schools play an important role in offering a literate environment for students. Schools may foster reading motivation and reading for pleasure by establishing school and classroom libraries, offering a wide variety of books and other reading material in different genres, providing sheltered and comfortable spaces for individual reading activities (like reading clubs), and not forcing children into having to express and exchange their individual (intimate) reading experiences.

However, schools do not have sole responsibility. A broad range of actors may shape literacy motivation, from parents and peers to libraries. Parents may provide role models and influence children's attitudes towards literacy practices. Also, libraries have a vital role if they offer free books, especially for families who cannot afford to buy books. Regional or national campaigns may inspire children and their parents to engage in reading activities. (Cf. ELINET Country Reports, Frame of Reference, pp. 29ff.)

Adolescence is a crucial phase in life where young people develop long-term *identities and self-concepts* which include media preferences and practices (*media identity*). In this perspective, it is of

great importance that families, schools and communities offer young people rich opportunities to encounter the *culture of reading* and develop a stable *self-concept as a reader/writer* and member of a literary culture. This includes access to a broad variety of reading materials (in print and electronic forms) and stimulating literate environments in and outside of schools; it also includes opportunities to get actively involved in engaging with texts, and communicating, reflecting on and exchanging ideas about texts with peers and ´competent others´, such as teachers or parents (Ibid., pp. 45f).

5.1.1 Providing a literate environment at home

The home learning environment, particularly in the first three years, is extremely important. It determines the quantity and quality of interactions between the infant and the primary caregivers, who are the most powerful agents of language development, both receptive and expressive, in the context of everyday activities and experiences. During these years, experience-dependent creation of synapses is maximal. We know that the more words the children are exposed to, the more they can learn. Caregiver-child relations in their turn strongly influence the ability to learn, by influencing self-esteem, general knowledge and motivation.

Several indicators are used to describe the literate home environment of very young children in this report, drawing on data from PIRLS (it is important to note, however, that some of the PIRLS data are self-reported and may be biased by social desirability and the ways in which questions are interpreted by parents within countries).

Parental attitudes to reading

PIRLS 2011 used the 'Parents Like Reading Scale' to gather parents' responses to seven statements about reading and how often they read for enjoyment. Table 5.1 presents the figures for France for parent enjoyment for reading: 'like', 'somewhat like' or 'do not like' reading, as reported by PIRLS 2011 (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 4.4, p. 120), along with the average for the group of 23 EU countries that participated in the background questionnaire enquiry (of the 24 that participated in the reading assessment one, England, did not participate in this enquiry).

Compared to the EU-23 average, the proportion of 10-year-olds in France whose parents had positive attitudes toward reading is slightly lower. The association between parental attitudes to reading and student reading performance is shown by the fact that in France there were significant differences in the average reading performance between 10-year-olds whose parents liked to read (average achievement 553) and those whose parents did not (average achievement 501).

Table 5.1: Percentages of Students in PIRLS 2011 whose Parent(s) indicated Different Levels of Enjoyment of Reading – France and EU-23 Average

Parents...	France	EU-23[*]
like reading	22	35
somewhat like reading	62	53
do not like reading	17	12

Source: Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 4.4, p. 120.; * One of the EU-24 countries did not participate in this enquiry.

Home Educational Resources

Nineteen percent of parents in France reported having few home resources for learning (based on a scale that includes number of books at home, number of children's books at home, access to a quiet room to study, Internet access, and parent education and job status) – below the EU-24 Average of 25% (Table 5.2). Similarly, a 6 percentage point gap between the EU-24 Average (25%) for 'many resources' and the French figure (31%) suggests that primary students in France have greater access to home resources (ELINET Appendix C, Table E2). The difference in achievement between 10-year-olds in France whose parents reported having many home resources and few resources was 88 score points – 9 points higher than the corresponding EU-24 average difference of 79 points.

Table 5.2: Percentages of Pupils in PIRLS 2011 Whose Parents Reported Having Few or Many Home Resources for Learning, and Corresponding Mean Overall Reading Scores – France and EU-24 Average

Level of Home Resources	Few Resources		Many Resources		Difference
	%	Mean	%	Mean	(Many - Few)
France	19	475	31	562	**88**
EU-24	25	495	25	573	**79**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Number of books in the home

PIRLS 2011 offers two sets of data concerning books in the home: numbers of children's books in the home as reported by parents (Table B2 in ELINET Appendix B), and number of books in the home (regardless of whether they were children's books or not) as reported by students (Table E1 in ELINET Appendix C). In both cases the reported situation for France was in line with that for the EU-24.

In France, 8% of 10-year-olds reported having 10 or fewer books at home, compared with an EU-24 average of 11%. A very slightly higher proportion of pupils in France (14%) reported having over 200 books in their home compared with the EU-24 average (12%). The achievement gap between those with 0-10 books and those with 200+ books was 85 points, in line with the EU-24 average of 82 points (Table 5.3).

Table 5.3: Mean Overall Reading Scores of Pupils with 0-10 books at Home, and those with More than 200 Books – France and EU-24 Average

Books in the Home	None or Few Books (0-10)		More than 200 Books		Difference (More than 200 – None or few)
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
France	8	466	14	552	**85**
EU-24	11	482	12	563	**82**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Early Literacy Activity Scale

PIRLS 2011 reports the percentages of students whose parents (often, never or almost never) engaged in literacy-relevant activities with them before the beginning of primary school (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 4.6, p.126). Nine activities were considered: reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys, talking about things done, talking about things read, playing word games,

writing letters or words, reading signs and labels aloud. The situation in France reflected closely that across the EU-24 in this respect: 'often', 36% for France versus 41% for EU-24; 'sometimes', 62% versus 57%; 'never or almost never', 2% and 2%. For an overview of all European countries see Table B3 in ELINET Appendix B.

The Early Literacy Activity Scale correlates with later reading performance in Grade 4. In France, the average reading score of pupils whose parents 'often' engaged them in these activities before the beginning of primary school was 536, as compared with 515 for pupils whose parents 'sometimes' engaged them in these activities. While one cannot assume a causal effect, these data support assumptions about the importance of the time devoted to literacy-related activities in early childhood and their association with achievement in Grade 4 (CM1 in France).

While the Early Literacy Activity Scale provides a composite score, it is of interest to look at single items as well. If the category 'often' is considered, the percentages of pupils in France whose parents engaged in different literacy-related activities with them before the beginning of primary school are in line with those for the EU-24 averages (Table 5.4), save for parents singing songs to their young children, an activity much less common in France than in the EU group.

Table 5.4: Percentages of Students in PIRLS 2011 whose Parent(s) indicated that they Often Engaged in particular Literacy-relevant Activities with them before beginning Primary School – France and EU-24 Average

Activities parents often engaged in with their pre-primary children	France	EU-24
Read books to them	58	58
Told stories to them	56	51
Sang songs to them	44	51
Played games involving shapes (toys and puzzles) with them	66	64

Source: Mullis et al. 2012b.

Challenge: Since reading to the child is a predictor of future literacy achievement it is a matter of concern that about 40 per cent of children books are not read often. There is a need for programmes to raise awareness among all parents that literacy is a key to learning and life chances, and that the basis for good literacy achievement is laid in early childhood.

5.1.2 Providing a literate environment in school

Availability and use of classroom library

Based on data provided by their teachers, PIRLS shows that in 2011 87% of 10-year-old pupils in France were in classrooms which had class libraries – above the corresponding EU-24 average of 73% (ELINET Appendix C, Table H2). In France, 51% of students were in classrooms with more than 50 books, well above the EU-24 average of 32% (ibid.).

5.1.3 Providing a digital environment in school

A literate environment can also be created by incorporating digital devices into the school environment. In France, municipalities are responsible for resourcing primary schools with equipment and digital services, whereas in the case of secondary schools equipment resourcing is the responsibility of the regions (upper secondary schools) and departments (lower secondary school), while responsibility for the provision of digital services across the secondary sector is shared between local education authorities and central government (Terrades 2013).

Digital environment of primary students

According to teachers' reports in PIRLS 2011, 12% of 10-year-old students in France (the lowest among the EU-24) had a computer available for reading lessons in 2011, compared to the EU-24 average of 45% (ELINET Appendix C, Table I6). In France, 10% used a computer at least monthly to look up information. The corresponding EU-24 average is 40% (ibid). In France, 9% of students were in classrooms whose teachers reported that their students used computers to write stories or other texts at least monthly. The corresponding EU-24 average is 33%.

Primary schools in France have traditionally been less well-resourced with ICT equipment and digital services than schools in the secondary sector in France, and they remain less well-resourced than most other European countries as far as ICT is concerned (Ho 2014).

Digital environment of secondary students

According to the most recent annual survey of the prevalence and use of ICT in society in France (Brice et al. 2015, Annexe 2), almost all 12-17 year-olds now have mobile phones, tablets, smartphones and/or access to a computer at home, and the majority of them also have internet access via one or more of these devices. The most common ICT-based activities, engaged in by large majorities of these young people are social networking, downloading and listening to music, and emailing friends; though not such a common activity, around 40% of the 12-17 year olds surveys claimed to have already read books online or to be intending to do so in the future (op. cit., p114).

The situation in lower secondary schools has been slow in catching up, but the situation is now rapidly changing, most recently in response to a wide range of reform initiatives (Terrades 2013; MEN 2015b).

The availability of ICT equipment for instructional use, funded by regional authorities, has more than doubled over the past 10 years in lower secondary schools (Cormier & Rudolf 2015), according to annual government surveys of ICT resource availability. The 2013-14 survey, to which two-thirds of lower secondary schools responded, found that 22 computers or tablets were by then available for every 100 students (Figure 5.1). On average, for every 1000 students, secondary schools now also have available 11 interactive whiteboards and 31 data projectors, and over 90% of lower secondary schools have internet access in at least half their classrooms.

Figure 5.1: The increase in computer availability in French public-sector lower secondary schools over the past decade (number of devices per student)
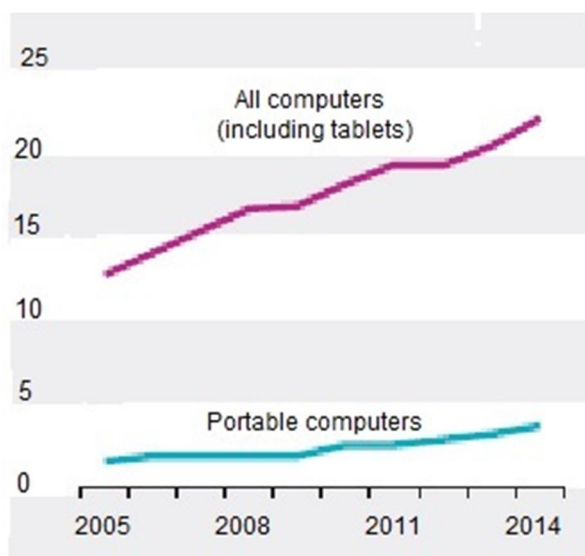
Source: Adapted from Cormier & Rudolf 2015.

The situation is very variable across institutions, however. Smaller schools, including in rural areas, tend to be better provided with ICT equipment and associated resources, including internet access, than larger schools, while schools in educational priority areas are also well-provisioned. High-speed broadband, though, is less accessible in rural schools.

What teachers and students do with the ICT resources they have access to is key to effective teaching and learning, and to the further development of students' literacy skills. A recent government initiative to encourage schools to use the internet more widely in subject teaching is ongoing (Benhaïm-Grosse et al. 2015). A group of 20 lower secondary schools with internet access were recruited to participate in the exercise ('*collèges connectés*'), which brought with it extra ICT resources and training support for subject teachers, both intended to encourage teachers to use ICT more frequently in their class teaching.

Particularly relevant findings merit brief mention here. One is that teachers' enthusiasm for using, or considering using, ICT in their teaching varied by subject specialism. Science and technology teachers were more positive in this sense than language and humanities teachers: 30-40% of the former group agreed that they were 'favourable' or 'very favourable' towards using ICT in teaching against around 20-25% of the history, geography and foreign language teachers and a lower 15% of the French language teachers. Whatever their initial views, there was evidence that teachers did expand their use of ICT in their classes as the pilot exercise progressed.

Students were also generally enthusiastic about ICT in their schoolwork. More than half claimed that when using ICT they could think more clearly, concentrate better, and write more easily, and they found their subject lessons more interesting. When the teachers were asked what particular skills they considered ICT to be helping students to develop, 70% or more mentioned using ICT efficiently and responsibly, searching for and extracting information, presenting research reports effectively, and working collaboratively. Only around 30% considered that using ICT helped develop their students' reading skills.

There are relatively high levels of access to both computers and broadband internet in upper secondary schools in France. The proportions of students with access to a virtual learning environment in these schools is higher than the EU average, at between 83% for students studying for a general baccalaureate and 68% for those studying for a vocational baccalaureate. There are also more data projectors available than in Europe on average. The percentage of teachers who use ICT in at least 25% of lessons is also above the EU average in vocational upper secondary schools, and also in the higher grades in the lower secondary school.

Recent government initiatives (see Section 5.1.4) are aimed at the rapid improvement in the ICT situation in schools at all levels.

> **Challenge:** While ICT provision in secondary schools has been rapidly improving in France, the primary sector still needs attention in this respect. In addition, in both sectors, CPD for teachers in the area of ICT use in classrooms is needed, to increase the frequency of use of computers during lessons, to help students develop their digital reading skills. The French Government has recognised the issues, and is addressing them in its new reform programme (MEN 2015b).

5.1.4 Improving literate environments for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples

France is among several countries that have established national bodies whose main purpose is the promotion of reading. According to Eurydice (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2011a), there are a couple of initiatives for reading promotion in France. There is, for example, the programme 'Reading together' (*lire et faire lire),* which tries to develop 'a joy of reading through intergenerational solidarity'. Volunteers aged above 50, working together with many governmental and private institutions, spend some […] time in recreation centres, nurseries, libraries, schools, etc., reading for and with small groups of children and adolescents (www.lireetfairelire.org). Then there is the National Reading Observatory, which is part of the Ministry of Education and supports teaching at school, but also carries out research into the reading practices of adolescents […]. In addition, the French Reading Association (*Association Française pour la Lecture*) tries, among other projects, to bring together teachers, librarians, parents and other parties in trying to organise lessons outside of classrooms (for details consult www.lecture.org). The National Literacy Agency (*Agence Nationale pour la Lutte contre l'Illetrisme*, ANLCI) has a remit to coordinate and optimise resources provided by the state, regions and companies to combat illiteracy, principally among adults, including young adults, but also, through dissemination of information about partner initiatives, among childern and adolescents (www.anlci.gouv.fr).

Family literacy programmes

France is among several countries that have established initiatives for reading promotion that address specific population groups, for example the *Association de la Foundation Étudiante pour la Ville* (AFEV) (www.afev.fr), and the 'educational accompaniment', where student volunteers support socially disadvantaged families whose children are having difficulties at school to develop a culture of reading, writing and learning. The AFEV offers programmes for adolescents.

There are also examples of systematic cooperation between schools and parents, in which parents whose children are experiencing reading difficulties try to support them through extra homework. However, struggling readers with less well-educated parents and less encouraging home environments might lack effective support from their families.

Initiatives to foster reading engagement among children and adolescents

Offering attractive reading material for children and adolescents in print and non-print

France is among nine European countries which provide a list of titles or authors as examples of what pupils might read (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2011a). These lists cover both primary and lower secondary levels. There is currently a bibliography of over 350 titles of young people's literature for pupils in the upper primary school (years 3, 4 and 5).

Recent Government initiatives to accelerate the computerisation of schools

Towards the end of 2015, in the context of its ICT Strategy for Schools, the French Government signed two partnership framework agreements with international companies designed to accelerate universal direct student access to digital learning resources in schools. One agreement, with Cisco France, is aimed at accelerating the computerisation of schools, and the professional development of teachers in the area of ICT[8]. Its three principal goals are:

- Continuing professional training in the field of computer networking, using Cisco's e-learning platform, Cisco Network Academy, with the aim of training 200,000 people by 2017. This training will be available to pupils, students, teachers and other users of lifelong learning.
- Raising awareness within the teaching profession of the challenges of the digital society and to employment opportunities in the field;
- Informing young people about digital technology employment opportunities, particularly as regards networking technologies, the development of business knowledge, and study and career advice with particular attention given to the challenge of promoting equity in computer-related course and job opportunities.

The second framework agreement, this time with Microsoft France for an initial period of 18 months, focuses on five key areas[9]:

- Cooperation in plans for a 'Charter of confidence', a Government initiative aimed at protecting the privacy and personal data of teachers and pupils. All external suppliers of ICT servisces will be required to sign up to the Charter;
- Training and support for all stakeholders using Microsoft technology in the context of the national ICT strategy, including administrative and teaching personnel;
- Provision of appropriate, accessible and optimal solutions for the integration of mobile devices, notably involving access to the Microsoft Cloud for all interested educational establishments;
- Support by Microsoft for the training of teachers in the preparation of courses and materials for teaching coding, including provision of a learning-oriented gaming platform as well as a secure, private, internal social network;
- Financial, technical, operational and commercial support from Microsoft to French stakeholders in e-Education, including producers of mobile devices, and educational and digital publishing organisations.

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[8]http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid96025/numerique-a-l-ecole-partenariat-entre-le-ministere-de-l-education-nationale-et-cisco.html.
[9] http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid96030/numerique-a-l-ecole-partenariat-entre-le-ministere-de-l-education-nationale-et-microsoft.html.

5.2 Improving the quality of teaching

To improve the quality of teaching, important aspects need to be considered:

- the quality of preschool
- coherent literacy curricula
- high-quality reading instruction,
- early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners
- highly qualified teachers (cf. Frame of Reference for ELINET Country Reports).

5.2.1 Quality of preschool

While early childhood education has long been neglected as a public issue, nowadays early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been recognized as important for:

... better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; more female labour market participation; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for the society at large. (OECD 2012, p.9)

In all European countries pre-primary education is an important part of political reflection and action.

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated:

Increasing investment in high-quality ECEC is one of the best investments Member States can make in Europe's future human capital. 'High quality' means highly-qualified staff and a curriculum focused on language development through play with an emphasis on language, psychomotor and social development, and emerging literacy skills, building on children's natural developmental stages. (HLG 2012, p.59)

While there is no international or Europe-wide agreed concept of ECEC quality, there is agreement that quality is a complex concept and has different dimensions which are interrelated. In this report we focus on *structural quality* which refers to characteristics of the whole system, e.g. the financing of pre-primary education, the relation of staff to children, regulations for staff training and qualifications, and curriculum design. There are some data concerning structural quality, but there is a lack of research and data about process quality, practices in ECEC institutions, the relation between children and teachers, and what children actually experience in their institutions and programmes.

Annual expenditure on pre-primary education and the pupil-teacher ratio

According to recent data (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, Figure D3), the total public expenditure per child in pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP in France is 0.7%. The range is from 0.04% in Turkey and 0.1% in Ireland to 1.01% in Denmark (for an overview of European countries see Table D1 in ELINET Appendix B). The pupil-teacher ratio in pre-primary schools for children at the age of four in France is 21:1 (OECD 2014b, p. 451). For an overview of other European countries see Table D2 in ELINET Appendix B.

Preschool teachers' qualifications and gender mix

A Masters degree is required of all intending teachers in France, whatever their target sector. Preschool teachers are drawn from those individuals who meet the criteria for recruitment into primary teaching, successful candidates having a choice between primary teaching and preschool teaching.

Just under 18% of the pre-primary teachers in France are males. This is the highest percentage in Europe, the range being from 0.2% in Bulgaria and Hungary to 17.7% in France (for an overview of European countries see Table D3 in ELINET Appendix B).

Preschool language and literacy curriculum

The design of the preschool curriculum is an important aspect of overall quality. It takes into consideration that young children have learning needs that are sometimes different from those of school-age children. Preschool programmes should focus on developing children's emergent literacy skills through playful experience rather than systematic training in phonics or teaching the alphabet. Indeed, there is no evidence that systematic instruction of reading in preschool has any benefit for future learning (Suggate et al. 2012; Suggate 2013).

Fostering the development of emergent literacy skills through playful activities is an important function of preschool institutions, providing a basis for formal literacy instruction in primary school. We consider the following to be key components: oral language development, including vocabulary learning and grammar, familiarisation with the language of books (e.g. through hearing stories read and told), being engaged and motivated in literacy-related activities, experiencing a literacy-rich environment, developing concepts of print, and language awareness.

The nature of ECEC guidance documents varies considerably across countries. In France, such documents may be incorporated into legislation as part of an education programme, as in Estonia, Spain and Slovenia (for a first overview on the national levels see European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice 2011a; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014).

It seems that most preschool teachers, in France as elsewhere, try to provide a literacy environment where children learn and engage in the communicative functions of reading and writing, with the aim of developing curiosity and motivation to learn to read and write in school. Reading books aloud, telling stories, presenting picture books, using writing in communicative contexts (e.g. the teacher writes down words or sentences from the child's dictation) – these are all well-known methods of promoting literacy at a young age.

Early language **and literacy screening and training**

At nursery school, children are expected to be regularly assessed with reference to learning objectives established in the *socle commun*. An official guidebook provides staff with advice and support for this purpose (MEN 2010). The document lists the learning objectives for this phase of education (for language, numeracy, social development, and so on), and provides examples of appropriate assessment activities together with interpretive guidance.

At the end of the last year in nursery school, teachers are required to produce a 'report card' for each child, summarising development up to that point. The report card is incorporated into the child's school record (*livret scolaire*), a document that accompanies the child through to the end of primary education. As a result of the ongoing reform of the education system, a new-style, online, school record will in future accompany pupils through to the end of the lower secondary school (MEN 2015b, c).

5.2.2 Literacy curricula in schools

After many years of preoccupation and debate about its need and potential value, and stimulated by PISA, a 'common base of knowledge and skills' (*Socle commun de connaissances et de compétences)* was introduced into France in 2006 (MEN 2006). The *socle commun,* which is essentially a framework for teaching and learning*,* identifies the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that every student is expected to have acquired and developed by the end of compulsory education, in order to succeed in future learning and in personal, community and professional life. Seven areas of development are covered, the first five of which are closely aligned to the pre-existing curriculum: French language and literature; a modern foreign language; mathematics, science and technology; ICT; humanities; civics and sociology; autonomy and initiative.

Following an extensive nationwide stakeholder consultation through 2013-14 a modified *socle commun*, evolved among other things to include elements of 'culture', and, renamed the *Socle commun de connaissances, de compétences et de culture*, is scheduled for launch in September 2016 (MEN 2015a). The reform resulted in seven areas of development being rationalised into five:

- language for thought and communication
  (les langages pour penser et communiquer)
- strategies and tools for learning
  (les méthodes et outils pour apprendre)
- development of self as an individual and citizen
  (la formation de la personne et du citoyen)
- nature and technology
  (les systèmes naturels et les systèmes techniques)
- perceptions of the world and human behaviour
  (les représentations du monde et l'activité humaine)

The elements of this foundation for learning, life and work are expected to be developed throughout three identified phases of compulsory education:

- Phase 2: acquisition of basic knowledge and skills
  first three years of primary school
  (Cycle 2, cycle des apprentissages fondamentaux: CP, CE1, et CE2)

- Phase 3: learning consolidation
  final two years of the primary school and 1st year of the lower secondary school
  (Cycle 3, cycle de consolidation: CM1, CM2 et classe de 6ème)

- Phase 4: further in-depth development
  final three years of the lower secondary school
  (Cycle 4, cycle des approfondissements: classes de 5ème, 4ème et 3ème)

Importantly, all teachers throughout the primary and lower secondary school, including teachers of subjects other than French, are expected to contribute to students' literacy development, so that by the end of compulsory schooling the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values outlined in the *socle commun* should have been acquired. Grammar, vocabulary and spelling, the essential tools of language communication, are considered areas for special attention, given the evidence from national surveys of falling levels of mastery over recent years (see Section 4.3). Note that the framework of the *socle commun* does not afford any special prominence to reading literacy, but considers writing and speaking skills as being as important as reading skills in literacy development.

Primary school curricula

Among the 24 European countries that participated in PIRLS 2011, six countries had a national primary curriculum specifically for reading, namely France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, the Russian Federation, and Sweden. It means that in France's national curriculum at that time reading was a separate curriculum area in the primary sector. In all other EU-24 countries reading is usually taught as part of the national language curriculum that also includes writing and other communication skills (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol.1, Exhibit 5, p.30).

The first three points of emphasis in the French language curriculum in the primary school concern oral language, reading (with elements of literature) and writing texts, and the study of vocabulary, grammar, and spelling (Colmant 2012, p.230).

Reading for pleasure

According to the PIRLS 2011 Encyclopaedia, France is among 11 of the EU-24 countries which reported some emphasis on reading for pleasure in the primary curriculum. Four of the EU-24 countries reported that reading for pleasure was given a little emphasis and 9 countries that it had major emphasis (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol.1, Exhibit 9, p. 36).

Contents of literacy curricula

The Eurydice report Teaching Reading in Europe offers a broad range of information about the content of reading literacy curricula and official guidelines (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2011a). In order not to duplicate this work only two aspects were addressed in the ELINET country reports whose importance might not yet be acknowledged and therefore might be missing in the literacy curricula and official guidelines: explicit instruction of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (phonics), and reading strategies.

Explicit instruction of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (phonics)

Linking sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet; using knowledge of letters, sounds and words when reading; combining letters, understanding that the same sound can have different spellings, and using knowledge of letters, sounds and words when writing are all taught during primary education in France. Also, students read a range of familiar and common words independently; work on enriching vocabulary; write their own name from memory, and make progress in recognising words (short to long) during primary education.

In summary, it can be said that the curriculum in France includes four of six indicators for word identification and four of five indicators for knowledge of phonics during primary years (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2011a, Figure 1.2, p.56). Interestingly, phonemic awareness was emphasised at pre-primary level, but not at primary level, in France, but that has now changed (MEN 2015b).

Between ages 6–7 (Grades 1–2), children become acquainted with the functioning of written language. This includes also connecting sounds with letters.

Teaching reading strategies in primary schools

While literacy instruction in the early years is more focused on code-based skills, in later stages it is important to develop and foster a wide range of comprehension strategies with all children. Explicit

teaching of comprehension strategies is effective for improving reading comprehension among readers with different levels of ability. These strategies include:

- Drawing inferences or interpretations while reading text and graphic data
- Summarising text and focusing selectively on the most important information
- Making connections between different parts of a text
- Using background knowledge
- Checking/monitoring own comprehension
- Constructing visual representations
- Reflecting on their own reading process
  (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2011a, p. 55).

According to an analysis of national steering documents in 2010 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2011a, Figure 1.4, p.60) the following reading strategies were explicitly mentioned in literacy curricula in France: drawing inferences, summarising text, using background knowledge, monitoring own comprehension. Not mentioned were: making connections between parts of a text, constructing visual representations, pupils reflecting on their own reading process

Literacy curricula in secondary schools

In addition to the inclusion of French language and literature as a core area in the lower secondary school curriculum, secondary school teachers of whatever discipline are now expected to contribute to the development of students' literacy skills, guided by the *socle commun*.

Challenge: Given that national surveys in France have revealed steadily decreasing levels of mastery of the basic language skills of grammar, vocabulary and spelling, these have been identified as a priority area for attention throughout compulsory schooling. Every primary and lower secondary school teacher, whatever their specialist discipline, is expected to contribute to the development of literacy in general, and to address in particular the basic language skills, including, where relevant, in disciplinary contexts. Teachers need organised professional development in order to meet these new demands.
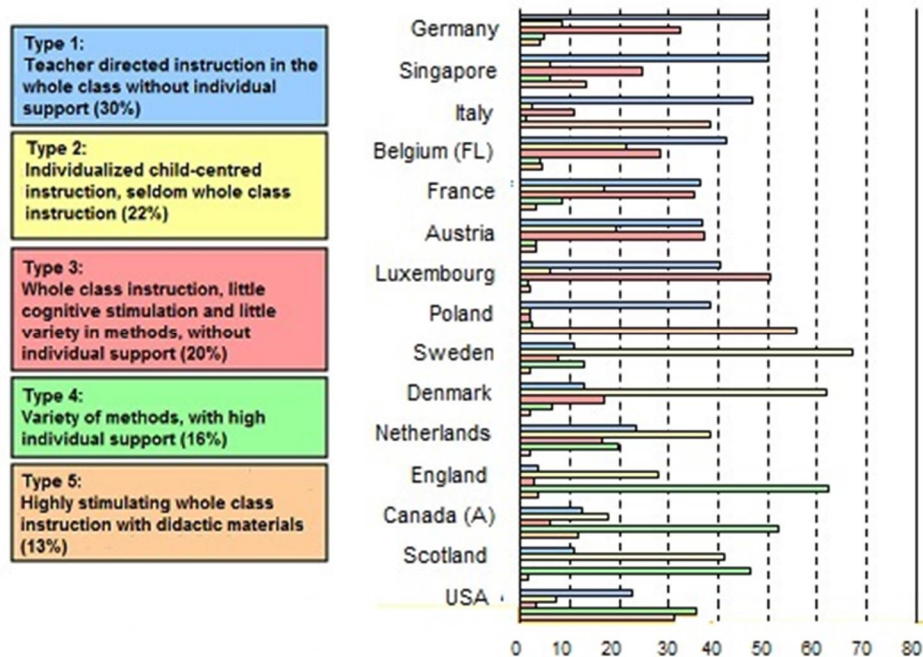
5.2.3 Reading Instruction

While most literacy researchers have clear concepts about effective literacy instruction, we do not know much about what is actually going on in classrooms in France or other European countries. In order to describe the practice of reading instruction we would need extensive observational studies, but observational studies of any size remain rare. There is a noteworthy shortage of data on actual reading instruction in schools. Only PIRLS offers some data for primary schools, albeit based on self reports by teachers (which might not be entirely valid).

In a latent class analysis using PIRLS 2006 data, Lankes and Carstensen (2007) identified 5 types of instruction in the teachers' self reports:

- Type 1: Teacher-directed instruction in the whole class without individual support
- Type 2: Individualized child-centred instruction, seldom whole-class instruction
- Type 3: Whole-class instruction with little cognitive stimulation and little variety in methods, without individual support
- Type 4: Variety of methods with high individual support
- Type 5: Highly stimulating whole-class instruction with didactic materials.

There were significant differences between countries in terms of instructional approach (Figure 5.2). Two predominant types of instruction were identified in fourth grade (year group CM1) in France: whole-class teacher-directed instruction without individual support, and whole-class instruction with little cognitive stimulation and little variety in methods, without individual support. Analysis of PIRLS 2011 teacher self-reports similarly revealed differences between the approaches to reading instruction in European countries (Mullis et al. 2012a).

Figure 5.2: Distribution of types of Reading Instruction (PIRLS 2006 data)

Source: Adapted from Lankes & Carstensen 2007

In PIRLS 2011 principals and teachers provided some information on language and reading instruction. As far as instructional time spent on language and reading is concerned, the following results are of interest. According to PIRLS 2011 (Mullis et al. 2012a, p. 214, Exhibit 8.4; ELINET Appendix C, Table I3), pupils in France spent more hours per year at school in 2011 (934 hours) than on average across the EU-24 countries (850 hours) – though data were available in respect of fewer than 50% of the sampled students in France, so that this and other comparisons are at best indicative. Students in France spent 285 hours (about thirty percent of all instructional hours) on instruction in the language of the PIRLS test, compared to an EU-24 average of 241 hours. In France, 81 instructional hours per year were spent on reading as part of language, compared with an EU-24 average of 68, though the EU-24 average is itself low relative to, for example, the United States and New Zealand (both 131 hours).

Teachers in France reported allocating less time to teaching reading across the curriculum and in reading classes (134 instructional hours per year) than on average across the EU-24 countries (147 hours. According to the PIRLS 2011 Encyclopaedia, the curriculum for France specifies that one-third of total instructional time should be spent on language/reading time (Mullis et al., 2012b, Vol. 1, Exhibit 6). In the same volume, Colmant (2012) notes that the curriculum introduced into French schools in 2008 specified that students in Grades 1-2 (year groups CP and CE1) should receive 10 hours of instruction in the French language, including reading, and that students in Grades 3-5 (year groups CE2, CM1, CM2) should receive 8 hours.

Challenge: Reading instruction in French primary schools would seem to be predominantly whole-class delivery, with little individual support. Organised professional development could help to change this situation, so that teaching becomes more individualised, interactive and inter-disciplinary. Furthermore, ways might be sought to increase the time devoted to reading instruction across the curriculum.

Activities of teachers to develop students' comprehension skills and to engage them

PIRLS 2011 provided information on the frequency with which teachers in France engaged students in specific reading comprehension activities. Although the curriculum in France draws attention to several important reading comprehension skills, it seems that these are not emphasised to a great extent in the work of teachers and students. A number of skills, such as comparing what students have read with experiences they have had, and making predictions about what will happen next in the text, are practised much less frequently on a daily or almost daily basis than on average across EU countries (Table 5.6).

Table 5.6: Percentages of Grade 4 Students in PIRLS 2011 who Claimed to be Engaged 'every day or almost every day' in Specific Reading Comprehension Activities – France and EU-24 Average

Activities	France	EU-24
Locate information within the text	62	66
Identify main ideas of what they have read	46	56
Explain or support their understanding of what they have read	52	62
Compare what they have read with experiences they have had	8	35
Compare what they have read with other things they have read	9	22
Make predictions about what will happen next in the text	14	22
Make generalisations and inferences	12	37
Describe the style or structure of the text	9	23
Determine the author's perspective or intention	8	21

Source: Mullis et al 2012b

PIRLS, in 2011, also assessed which instructional practices teachers used to engage students in learning (for an overview of responses in France and other European countries see Table I.2 in ELINET Appendix C). It seems that students whose teachers used instructional practices to engage learning in most lessons had higher scores in reading than those whose teachers used such practices in only about half the lessons or less (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 8.6, p.220); relevant practices were summarising the lesson's goals, relating the lesson to students' daily lives, questioning to elicit reasons and explanations, encouraging students to show improvement, praising students for good effort, bringing interesting things to class. Based on a scale summarising frequencies across all six items, 55% of students in France were deemed to be taught by teachers who implemented instructional practices to engage learning in 'most lessons'. The corresponding EU-24 average was 70% (ELINET Appendix C, Table I2).

It is well documented in research studies that explicit teaching of comprehension strategies may improve reading comprehension among readers with different levels of ability. While there are no data available for secondary schools, some PISA data also suggest that there is a need for explicit instruction of reading strategies. As reported in Section 4.2, in France there was in 2009 a gap of

almost 110 points – equivalent to almost three years of schooling – between the students who knew which strategies are the most efficient to understand and remember a text, and those who had only a limited knowledge of these metacognitive activities. This remarkable difference reflects the close relation between reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading.

> **Challenge:** Primary students in France are not sufficiently engaged by teachers in higher-order reading comprehension activities. Organised professional development might usefully address this weakness.

Digital literacy part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools

Media education is explicitly included in the school curriculum under the name *Education aux médias et à l'information* (Media and ICT Education), as a cross-curricular topic. It is taught as a separate subject and as a tool for other subjects.

5.2.4 Early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners

Effective assessment tools upon entry to primary school will help teachers identify literacy skills from the very beginning of formal education. Regular formative assessment throughout primary school will ensure that literacy problems do not continue to go unrecognised, and that students receive the support they need through education that matches their learning needs. This should prevent children leaving school with unrecognised literacy problems (HLG 2012, p.67).

Standards as a basis of assessment of reading difficulties

Standards of reading achievement allowing teachers, parents and school leaders to understand the rate of progress of learners and to identify individual strengths and needs should be integrated into the curriculum and should be the basis of assessments. The High Level Group pointed out that there is a need to establish minimal standards of literacy achievement (benchmarks) for each grade, and to administer regular tests based on these standards, to allow for identification of struggling readers/writers (HLG 2012, p.43).

All EU countries have defined learning objectives in reading to be reached at the end of primary and secondary education cycles. However, only a few Member States have detailed standards (benchmarks) at each grade (school year) which form the basis of assessments allowing for early identification of reading difficulties and subsequent allocation of attention and resources. These standard-based assessments allow teachers and school leaders to judge children's progress and to target additional reading support.

Assessment standards and methods are prescribed by the language/reading curriculum in half of the 24 European countries that participated in PIRLS 2011 (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol. 1, p. 99, Exhibit 7). France is identified as a country in which goals and objectives for the language/reading curriculum are specified, but not assessment standards.

Screenings for reading competence to identify struggling readers

Diagnostic assessment has very recently been reintroduced into French schools, as part of the reform process (MEN 2015b, Fiche 08). Following practice in the historic diagnostic survey programme mentioned in Section 4.3, which was abandoned in 2003 in favour of 'accountability testing', cohort assessment in literacy and numeracy once again takes place at the beginning of the third year in the primary school (year group CE2). An important difference from previous practice, however, is that

teacher assessment has now replaced formal testing. An online bank of assessment items and tasks, along with associated guidance on use and performance recording, is available to assist teachers in their new assessment role. Teachers are expected to use the information gathered in this way about pupils' strengths and weaknesses to help plan appropriate programmes of learning for the year. Clearly, any child showing evidence of particularly severe difficulties with literacy or numeracy at this stage would be identified for targeted support.

Every child in France has a school report card regularly sent to his or her parents. In 2008, Personal Skills became a part of the report card. A personal skills booklet (*Livret Personnel de Compétences) currently* provides evidence of the acquisition of the common base of knowledge and skills (the *socle commun*) from entry to preschool to the end of lower secondary schooling. It is completed by teachers at the end of Stage 1 (Grade 2, CE1), Stage 2 (Grades 3-5, CE2-CM2) and Stage 3 (Grades 6-9, 6ème to 3ème). At each stage, families are updated on their children's progress. In 2016, as a result of the ongoing major reform of education (MEN 2015b), a new, online, record book (*Livret scolaire,* MEN 2015c) replaces the current paper-based version, facilitating progress across the entire period of pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education.

Early identification of and support for children and adolescents with literacy difficulties

According to the PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia:

> ...as an institutional network of teachers and psychologists, the *Réseaux d'Aides Spécialisées aux Élèves en Difficultés* (Network of Specialist Aides for Students with Difficulties) assists children with learning difficulties. The network's mission is to work with teachers in providing specialized help either inside or outside of the classroom to students who are struggling in ordinary classes. Nevertheless, we must also stress that the assistance is not specific to reading and can often include educational, rehabilitative, or psychological help. To arrange for specialized help, a dialogue is organized between the head of school, the network members, and the teacher of the underachieving student. (Mullis et al. 2012b, p.235)

Guidance requires the whole educational community to work in the interests of the pupils' future. Teachers, psychology-guidance councillors and school heads are the main players, but responsibility also involves each person in their specific skills. There are also other partners from outside the education system who can tell students about the world of work or prepare them for vocational integration. In every school, pupils and their families have the right to ask for advice from a school psychologist or guidance councillor. In contact with the teachers and school head, the psychologist/guidance councillor is the school's technical advisor for guidance. Their understanding of training systems, transfer procedures, the professions and integration, along with their psychology skills, make them players with multi-disciplinary resources. Teaching staff should call for them whenever there is an individual problem of adaptation or complex guidance issues.

Proportion of struggling readers receiving remedial instruction

PIRLS offers some data concerning issues of remedial instruction in primary schools. One question was whether all pupils receive remedial instruction when needed. Based on a question that class teachers answered in PIRLS 2011, it is estimated that 21% of students in fourth grade in France (year group CM1) were considered to be in need of remedial reading instruction that year. It was also estimated by teachers that 16% were actually in receipt of remedial reading instruction (ELINET Appendix C, Table

K1). Hence, there was a shortfall of 5% between those in need and those in receipt. On average across EU-24 countries, 18% of students in Grade 4 in 2011 were identified by their teachers as being in need of remedial teaching, while 13% were identified as being in receipt of such teaching. In France, 25% of students in fourth grade performed at or below the PIRLS Low benchmark on overall reading (ELINET Appendix C, Table A.6). Hence, the percentages of students in France in receipt of remedial reading instruction (16%), as estimated by the teacher questionnaire responses in PIRLS 2011, is below the percentage who performed poorly in the survey.

> **Challenge:** The percentages of primary students in France in receipt of remedial reading instruction would appear to be below requirements, suggesting a need for policy attention.

Kinds of support offered

It is crucial that teachers provide support measures to help struggling readers. European countries differ widely in their approaches, from in-class support with additional support staff (reading specialists, teaching assistants or other adults) working in the classroom together with a teacher, to out-of-class support where speech therapists or (educational) psychologists offer guidance and support for students with reading difficulties.

PIRLS 2011 provides information about additional staff and availability of support persons for reading. Based on teacher responses to a series of questions, around 4% of students in France were noted to have been in classes where there was always access to specialised professionals to work with students who had reading difficulties, compared with an EU-24 average of 25% (Table 5.7). Just 1% of students in France were in classrooms where there was access to a teaching assistant with the same frequency, while fewer than 1% were in classrooms where there was access to an adult/parent volunteer. Corresponding EU averages are 13% and 3%, respectively, indicating relatively less use of these resources in France.

Table 5.7: Percentages of Grade 4 Students in Classrooms with Access to Additional Personnel to Work with Children with Reading Difficulties – France and EU-24 Average

| | France | | | EU-24 | | |
Access to…	Always	Sometimes	Never	Always	Sometimes	Never
Specialised professional	4	31	64	25	42	33
Teacher aide	1	10	89	13	34	53
Adult/parent volunteer	<1	5	95	3	17	80

Source: ELINET Appendix C, Tables K2-K4

According to responses provided by teachers in PIRLS 2011, 47% of students in France were in classes where the teacher arranges for students falling behind in reading to work with a specialist such as a reading professional (Table 5.8). The corresponding EU-24 average is a little higher at 55%. Thirty-eight percent of students in France were in classes whose teachers waited to see if performance improved with maturation – in line with the EU-24 average of 37%. Eighty-seven percent of students in France were being taught by teachers who spent more time working on reading individually with a student who fell behind – just below the EU-24 average (90%). Finally, 88% of students in France and 97% on average across the EU-24 were being taught by teachers who asked parents to provide additional support to students who fell behind in reading.

Table 5.8: Percentages of Grade 4 Students in Classrooms Where Teachers Engage in Specified Activities to Support Students Who Begin to Fall Behind in Reading – France and EU-24 Average

Activity	France	EU-24
I have students work with a specialised professional	47	55
I wait to see if performance improves with maturation	38	37
I spend more time working on reading individually with the student	87	90
I ask the parents to help the students with reading	88	97

Source: ELINET Appendix C, Tables K5-K8.

> **Challenge:** According to PIRLS 2011, the percentages of primary students in France that were in classes where there was always access to specialised professionals to assist with reading difficulties was markedly lower than the average across participating EU countries. This is clearly an area for policy intervention.

5.2.5 Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

Entry requirements for Initial Teacher Education

Teacher education in France was the subject of a major reform and reorganisation in 2010 (for details see Lapostolle & Chevaillier 2011). One important change was that, following a general move within Europe to upgrade teaching forces, a Master's degree became a requirement for all intending teachers in France, in both primary (subsuming pre-primary) and secondary sectors. The teacher training colleges that existed previously (IUFM) have been absorbed into the universities, and the teacher recruitment process has been modified.

Level of qualification and length of required training for primary teachers

Since the 2010 reform, all new primary teachers are required to have successfully completed a two-year postgraduate teacher training programme, leading to the award of a Master's degree, which is now the minimum requirement for entry to the teaching profession. The total time required to qualify as a professional teacher in France is thus five years. The Master's degree in itself is not, however, a guarantee of employment in teaching. During their postgraduate training, students hoping to teach in primary (or pre-primary) schools prepare also for competitive recruitment examinations, which are organised on a regional basis. In 2015 the number of successful applicants over the whole country was around 38%, according to the Ministry of Education[10]. After taking up their first post, new teachers must satisfactorily complete a probationary year in service before becoming full members of the profession.

Table 5.9 shows the proportions of Grade 4 students in France, and across the EU-24, who were being taught in 2011 by teachers with different levels of qualification, according to PIRLS 2011 data: in particular 75% of the French students had teachers who had completed a postgraduate university degree, a figure much higher than the average 27% for the EU-24, 14% had teachers with a bachelor's degree or equivalent but not a postgraduate degree, 3% had teachers who had completed post-

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[10]http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid66798/donnees-statistiques-concours-recrutement-professeurs-des-ecoles-session-2015.html, accessed 29 November 2015.

secondary education but did not have a degree, and 8% had teachers with no further than upper secondary education (a figure in line with the average of 6% for the EU-24).

Table 5.9: Percentages of Grade 4 Students Taught by Teachers with Varying Education Qualifications – France and EU-24 Average

Highest Qualification	Completed University Postgrad Degree	Completed Bachelor's Degree or Equivalent	Completed Post Secondary Education but not a Degree	No Further than Upper Secondary
France	75	14	3	8
EU-24	27	53	14	6

Source: Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 7.1, p. 188; ELINET Appendix C, Table J1.

Length of required training of secondary teachers

Since the 2010 reforms, new secondary teachers are required to hold a Master's degree, to participate in a competition for entry to the profession, and to complete a probationary year in service before becoming fully qualified. Candidates for admission to secondary school teaching can hold a Master's qualification in any discipline, and not necessarily in education. Another difference between the primary and secondary sectors is that whereas the recruitment competition for primary teachers takes place along regional lines, recruitment for secondary school posts is organised nationally on a subject-by-subject basis, and involves examinations and interviews leading to different types of qualification (CAPES, CAPEPS, Agrégation – the latter required for future teachers in the upper secondary school).

The role of literacy expertise in Initial Teacher Training

Important teacher competences are a) the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each individual student they teach, b) selection of appropriate instructional methods, and c) instruction in an effective and efficient manner. These topics should therefore be addressed in teacher training.

In PIRLS 2011, primary teachers were asked to indicate the level of emphasis given to a number of topics deemed relevant to teaching literacy in their pre-service teacher education. In France, Sweden and the United Kingdom all newly-qualified teachers are expected to be able to develop pupils' reading literacy skills, not just language teachers (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2011a, p. 99).

In PIRLS 2011, teachers recorded their areas of specialisation in their formal education and training (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 7.2, p.190). In France, 65% of the surveyed fourth grade students had reading teachers with an educational emphasis on language, 38% had teachers with an emphasis on pedagogy/teaching reading, and 19% had teachers with an emphasis on reading. These figures are below the corresponding EU-24 figures of 74%, 59% and 30%, respectively.

As noted in Table 5.10 below, 4% of students in France in PIRLS 2011 had a teacher who reported assessment methods in reading as an area of major emphasis in initial teacher education, compared with an EU-24 average of 27%.

Table 5.10: Percentages of Students Taught by Teachers who Reported each of Several Topics to be Areas of Emphasis during Initial Teacher Education – France and EU-24 Average

Topic	Test Language	Reading Pedagogy	Reading Theory	Remedial Reading	Assessment Methods in Reading
France	65	38	19	11	4
EU-24	74	59	30	22	27

Source: Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 7.2, p. 190 and ELINET Appendix C, Table J2 – J3.

> **Challenge:** There is a need to broaden the ITE curriculum for aspiring primary teachers, in order to strengthen their professional development so that they can better meet current teaching pressures and demands.

Digital literacy as part of initial teacher education

Digital literacy is included in the initial education of all teachers in France. There are compulsory training and national accreditation standards for the programmes, competence frameworks and national certification (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2011b).

In the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) of 2013, however, just 24% of the surveyed lower secondary teachers in France reported using ICT for students' projects or class work, compared with an average of 34% across the whole group of participating European countries (European Commission 2014; Equipe TALIS 2014). Moreover, further training in the use of ICT in their teaching was identified as a need by the majority of teachers. Training in the use of ICT in teaching and learning is currently a major priority in France for the lower secondary sector (MEN 2015b).

5.2.6 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Universities in France are in charge of the continuing professional development of in-service teachers. It is incumbent upon each *recteur d'académie* (regional director of education) to define the academic plan for CPD in their region, and to determine priorities according to the teacher training specifications outlined by the Ministry of Education. The *recteur* guarantees coherence between the initial training plan established by the regional university, the provisions of which with regard to training placements are subject to agreement, and the proposed CPD plan, supervising the continuing education of primary and secondary education teachers.

Teachers' engagement in CPD is not compulsory. However, CPD is clearly linked to career progression. The voluntary participation by teachers in one or several on-going training activities may be taken into account in their performance appraisal, which will partly determine their career advancement.

The prevalence and nature of CPD in France

The OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) gathers comparable data on the learning environment and the working conditions of teachers in schools across the world, with the aim of providing policy makers with information from the perspective of practitioners in schools. France was one of 19 participating European countries in the second TALIS survey, in 2013.

Among the many findings about teachers' attitudes, practices and concerns, TALIS 2013 confirmed that CPD involvement was relatively low among lower secondary school teachers in France: 76% had

undertaken some professional development activities in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with an average of 85%, and the duration of courses tended to be shorter in France than elsewhere (European Commission 2014; Equipe TALIS 2014). While almost all the lower secondary teachers surveyed in France felt confident about disciplinary knowledge, thanks to their initial training, only half felt so confident about their general teaching ability. Priority needs were identified as use of ICT in teaching, individualised teaching to address student diversity, and giving advice and future study guidance to their students.

Both lack of time (because of family and professional responsibilities) and absence of incentive (institutional support, relevant courses, etc.) were cited by teachers everywhere as major obstacles to involvement in CPD: one-third to one-half of teachers on average across participating countries, but with lower proportions in France cited lack of institutional support and CPD workload.

Time spent on professional development related to literacy

No data are available concerning the participation rate of teachers in literacy-related professional development, with one exception. In PIRLS 2011 teachers were asked how much time they had spent on professional development in reading during the two years before the survey. The data for France and for the EU-24 average are given in Table 5.6.

Table 5.6: Percentages of Students with Teachers Allocating Varying Amounts of Time to Professional Development Related to Reading in the Last Two Years – France and EU-24 Average

	More than 35 hours	16-35 hours	6-15 hours	Less than 6 hours	None
France	1	1	12	26	60
EU-24	9	9	25	28	29

Source: Mullis et al., 2012a, Exhibit 7.4, page 196, and Table J4 in ELINET Appendix C.

In France, 2% of the students had teachers who had spent 16 hours or more in CPD over the two years prior to the survey (EU-24 average: 18%), while 38% had teachers who had spent some time but less than 16 hours during this period (EU-24 average 53%). On the other hand, 60% of students in France (compared to 29% on average across the EU-24) were taught by teachers who had allocated no time to professional development in reading in the previous two years (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibition 7.4, p.196). These figures reveal a low CPD engagement on the part of French teachers.

Challenge: Improving participation in CPD targeted at building the literacy instruction and assessment confidence and expertise of teachers is important, especially considering the high proportion of struggling readers in French primary and secondary classes.

5.3 Increasing participation, inclusion and equity

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy drew attention to persistent gaps in literacy, namely the gender gap, the socioeconomic gap, and the migrant gap (HLG 2012, pp.46–50). These gaps derive from the reading literacy studies, national and international, that repeatedly show unequal distribution of results among groups of children and adolescents.

The **socioeconomic gap** in literacy refers to the fact that children and adolescents from disadvantaged families have lower mean performance in reading than students from more advantaged families. However, the degree to which family background relates to the reading literacy performance varies from one country to another, even within Europe. Family background measured as parents' educational level and/or occupation, or measured as economic, social and cultural status, is one of the most important predictors of reading literacy performance. Family background also explains some of the performance differences between schools.

The **migrant gap** refers to unequal distribution of learning outcomes between native students and immigrant students, who in most countries have lower levels of reading literacy in the principal national language than the native students. In many countries the migrant gap is associated with the socioeconomic gap, but this explains only a part of it, because the migrant gap is also associated with home language differing from the language of instruction at school, which increases the risk of low performance in reading. It is noteworthy that even language minorities with high status in society (and above-average socioeconomic background) show below average performance if the language of school is not supported at home, which signals the importance of a good command of the language used at school.

Another alarming gap in reading literacy in many countries is the **gender difference,** which is more critical for adolescents than for children. In all PISA studies, 15-year-old girls outperformed boys in reading in all the European countries, and boys are frequently overrepresented among the low performers. PISA 2009 results showed that these differences are associated with differences in student attitudes and behaviours that are related to gender, i.e. with reading engagement, and not necessarily gender as such. Therefore the gender gap might also be related to growing up in a family or in a school environment that values reading and learning and considers reading as a meaningful activity.

To achieve fairer and more inclusive participation in literacy learning we need to close these gaps, which already start in early childhood, by supporting 'at risk' children, adolescents and adults. Students at risk must have access to language screening and flexible language learning opportunities in school, tailored to individual needs. Furthermore, early support for children and adolescents with special needs is necessary.

In the section below we address the following issues:
- Compensating socioeconomic and cultural background factors
- Promoting preschool attendance, especially among disadvantaged children
- Support for childern with special needs
- Support for children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school.
- Addressing the gender gap among adolescents.
- Preventing early school leaving

The section refers to children and adolescents who for different reasons can be considered as a group 'at risk' (from disadvantaged homes, those whose home language is not the language of school, or

those with special educational needs). The focus is on preventing literacy difficulties among members of these groups.

5.3.1 Compensating socioeconomic and cultural background factors

The child's socioeconomic and cultural background has a strong impact on literacy. Material poverty and educational level, particularly of the mother, are well-recognized main factors influencing literacy. The primary language spoken at home also influences literacy development.

In order to describe the socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence emergent literacy, and to provide comparability across Europe, we here use several indicators that originated in international survey programmes (for more information concerning the concepts and indicators see ELINET Appendix A).

Poverty indicators

The Gini index is the most commonly used measure of inequality, and represents the income distribution of a nation's residents, with values between 0% (maximum equality) and 100% (maximum inequality). In the European countries participating in ELINET the range is from 23% in Norway to 35% in Spain (for an overview of European countries see Table A1 in ELINET Appendix B). With 30% France is close to average for European countries in ELINET.

An indicator of child poverty is the percentage of children living in a household in which disposable income, when adjusted for family size and composition, is less than 50% of the national median income (Adamson 2012, p.3). The child poverty rate in France is 9%. The range is from 5% in Iceland to 25% in Romania (for an overview of European countries see Table A2 in ELINET Appendix B).

Mother's education level

The PIRLS 2011 database offers information about mother`s level of education, with reference to ISCED levels. The figures for France are presented below and point to a high level of education, compared with the average figures for the European countries participating in PIRLS (for an overview of European countries see Table A3 in ELINET Appendix B).

Table 5.7: Percentages of Students whose Mothers have different levels of Education – France and EU-24 Average

		France	EU-24
>ISCED 5	Beyond first stage tertiary education	20	10
ISCED 5A	Tertiary education (first stage) with academic orientation	5	14
ISCED 5B	Tertiary education (first stage) with occupation orientation	14	10
ISCED 4	Post-secondary non-tertiary education	1	7
ISCED 3	Upper secondary education	46	36
ISCED 2	Lower secondary education	9	17
ISCED 1	Primary education	4	5
<ISCED 1	No schooling	<1	<1

Source: ELINET Appendix B, Table A3.

Teenage mothers and single parent families

The percentage of births to teenage mothers in France in 2013 was under 2%, while the percentage of children living mainly with a single parent was 10%. The range for the European countries participating in ELINET is from just over 1% in Croatia to 30% in Denmark (for an overview of European countries see Table A5 in ELINET Appendix B).

Very low birth weight and severe prematurity

According to Zeitlin et al (2010, Figure 7.11, p.149) the percentage of live births with a birth weight under 2500 grams in France in 2010 was just under 6%. The range is from 3% in Iceland to 9% in Cyprus (for an overview of European countries see Table E1 in ELINET Appendix B). According to the same source (ibid., Figure 7.14, p.155) the percentage of live births with a gestational age <32 weeks was just under 1% in France in 2010 (with a range from 0.7% in Iceland to 1.4% in Hungary). In France, the percentage of live births with a gestational age between 32 and 36 weeks was 5% (with a range from 4% in Lithuania to 7% in Hungary (for an overview of European countries see Table E2 in ELINET Appendix B).

5.3.2 Promoting preschool attendance, especially among disadvantaged children

There is a positive relationship in general between the length of preschool education attendance and the average reading score in grade 4, as PIRLS 2011 data show (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 4.7, p. 128), and most European countries are striving to increase their preschool participation.

State-run nursery schooling is secular and free of charge in France. The enrolment rate at ages 3 to 5 is 100%, and has been at that level for two decades (DEPP 2015a, pp.34-35). As such, France exceeds the European benchmark for children between age 4 and the start of compulsory education participating in ECEC (for an overview of European countries see Table C1 in ELINET Appendix B). France is now giving attention to increasing the enrolment of 2-year-olds in preschools, priority being given to children from relatively deprived backgrounds.

Interestingly, despite the positive relationship between preschool attendance and reading performance in grade 4 mentioned above, PIRLS 2011 data might suggest that in France the relationship is not strong:

- 3 years or more preschool education: 76% of pupils (average reading score 524)
- More than 1 year but less than 3 years: 24% of pupils (average reading score 514)

For an overview of European countries see Table C3 in ELINET Appendix B.

5.3.3 Support for children with special needs

Arrangements for supporting children with special needs, including special educational needs, have recently changed as a result of the general reform of schooling in France. Different kinds of support, and associated procedures for recognising need and organising the appropriate support, are clearly identified for four different groups of children (MEN 2014):

- children with medical problems, such as asthma, life-threatening food allergies, dietary intolerances, and so on
- physically, mentally or psychologically challenged children
- children with reading difficulties, including as a result of dyslexia
- children experiencing general learning problems.

Depending on the nature of the special need, support can be requested by the head teacher, by parents or by students themselves, in some cases with confirmation of need from a medical or paramedical practitioner.

Once a pupil is accepted as having a special need all relevant staff, teachers, administrative staff, canteen staff, and so on, are advised, and a support plan designed and introduced. In the case of students with reading problems the support plan (*plan d'accompagnement personnalisé*, PAP) will include extra individual learning support from the class teacher and/or from a specialist, as well as physical supports such as text with larger font size, tablets or other electronic devices for reading in place of print, and so on.

5.3.4 Support for children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school

In every year every European country, including France, sees an influx of migrant individuals and families from other nations, and takes steps to help them to integrate successfully into society. Immigrant children are a particular case, faced as they are with transfer into an unfamiliar school system, in which instruction is in a language that is often not their own and which they therefore need to learn rapidly if their education is not to suffer in the long term.

In 2012 the French government announced new arrangements for the integration of newly arrived non-French-speaking children into the education system, and for the schooling of children from traveller families. Together, the measures set the principles intended to:

- crack down on discrimination;
- harmonise welcome procedures;
- guarantee that the Common Base of Knowledge, Skills and Culture is acquired;
- take into consideration the multilingual wealth of these children.

All new arrivals are now assessed to establish the most appropriate point at which to integrate them into the school system, depending on their existing educational achievement and level of mastery of the French language. The proportion of new non-French arrivals each year relative to the whole school population varies across the country, departments vary in population size, and the number schools required to accept newcomers as a proportion of the school population varies as well. These three factors influence the number of new arrivals assigned to individual schools, with the result that schools can find themselves receiving between 1 (around a third of schools) and 20 or more new pupils (around 8%), depending on their size and location (Robin & Touahir 2015).

The process of placement within a school differs between sectors. For insertion into a primary school the assessment is carried out locally either by the school's teaching team or, in the majority of cases, by the UPE2A teacher, a UPE2A being a special unit able to offer individual linguistic support. In the 2014-2015 school year, across metropolitan France and its DOM, just over one in 10 of the new arrivals were placed into regular classes in their primary schools, without any extra linguistic support; 75% of the rest were taken in charge by the school's UPE2A, and another 20% were placed into regular classes and given additional linguistic support in parallel. These proportions vary from one region to another, however; Figure 5.3 illustrates this variation for the EUP2A.

Figure 5.3: The proportion of newly arrived non-French speaking children taken in charge by the EUP2A, by region.
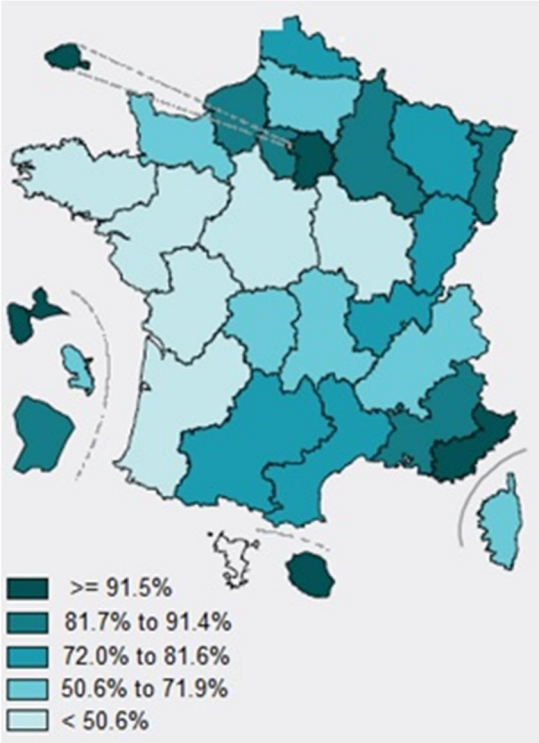
Source: Adapted from Robin & Touahir (2015).

In the case of intended assimilation into secondary schooling responsibility for placement decisions is assumed by staff in one or other of two specialist centres: a CIO (*Centre d'information et d'orientation*) or a CASNAV (*Centre académique pour la scolarisation des enfants allophones nouvellement arrives et des enfants issus de familles itinerants et de voyageurs*). A small proportion of newly arrived adolescents in the secondary sector are educated in dedicated classes that are not associated with any particular year group. Those in regular classes in the upper secondary school are generally assigned to the first year in the school, and they are roughly evenly divided between the two types of school, i.e. those that prepare students for the general baccalaureate and those that prepare them for the vocational baccalaureate.

At every stage in the school system non-French speaking newcomers can, after initial evaluation, be placed in classes one or more years below where they might otherwise be, given their age. Thus, in the primary school just over 30% of placed children are in classes one year behind normal, with another 5% in classes two years behind. In the lower secondary school around two-thirds of the newcomers are one or more years behind normal for their age, the majority being just one year behind. In the upper secondary school the proportion at least one year behind rises to more than 75%, the great majority again being just one year behind. Boys are slightly over-represented in these figures compared with girls; the over-representation, however, increases through the system.

5.3.5 Addressing the gender gap among adolescents

France, like most other Western European countries, witnesses continuing gender differences in many aspects of education and work (DEPP 2015d). Attainment surveys, both national and international, have repeatedly confirmed a general tendency for girls to be ahead of boys on average in their early language development, and in reading and writing throughout compulsory schooling (see Section 4),

with boys showing the better performances on average in mathematics and the physical sciences. Attitudes to different school subjects and associated motivation to learn also differ in the same direction. These differences in subject interests and related achievement continue beyond schooling into higher education and work, contributing to the persisting disparities in the representation of men and women in different education and employment sectors that concern governments so much.

In an effort to address the problem, six ministers, representing different government ministries, signed in November 2012 an inter-ministerial convention covering the 5-year period 2013-2018, for equality between girls and boys, women and men in the education system (DEPP 2015d). The convention is articulated around three priority areas:

1) The acquisition and transmission of a culture of gender equality.
2) Fostering the development of equality and mutual respect between girls and boys, women and men.
3) Aiming for a more even gender mix in subject choices at every level of education.

The initiative is to be monitored continuously, and will undergo a formal evaluation at the end of the five-year period.

5.3.6 Preventing early school leaving

The 2020 EU target value for the early school leaving (ESL) rate is 10%. As a result of various initiatives to avoid and address the problem, France, like the majority of Northern and Eastern European countries (Lefresne 2015), has already exceeded this target, having reduced its early leaving rate by 20% over the five years to December 2015 (MEN 2015d). The early leaving rate is now at 9% in France compared with an EU average of 11%; in southern European countries the rate is around 20%. In France the risk of early leaving without a qualification is 50% higher for boys than for girls, and 400% higher for the children of manual workers than for the children of managers (MEN 2015d).

Within the French Ministry of Education, the Mission to Tackle Early School Leaving - *Mission de lutte contre le décrochage* (MLDS) – is in charge of preventing early school leaving and helping school leavers return to school or training. Multi-agency teams (*Groupe de prévention du décrochage scolaire*) are also in place within schools to identify and support pupils who are demotivated as well as to support the integration of newcomers (European Commission, 2013, p.39; MEN 2015b).

Under the leadership of the Ministry of Education, up to eight different Ministries are involved in reducing early school leaving where regular policy dialogue across Ministries has been developed. For example, inter-service meetings take place every two months and inter-service working groups have been established with responsibility for developing common tools, collecting best practices and organising awareness raising events. In the framework of the inter-ministerial coordination, 360 local 'platforms' (*Platesformes de suivi et d'appui aux décrocheurs)* have been created throughout the country since 2010. They work in partnership with local stakeholders and networks active in the fields of education, youth work, youth inclusion and provision of guidance, employment, health, justice and agriculture. The aim is to ensure that more coordinated and tailored solutions are offered to young people identified as early school leavers. In addition, linked to the platforms, the Ministry of Education has introduced a network of training, qualification and employment called 'FOQUALE' with a key aim to improve coordination between all actions and actors under its responsibility. The purpose of the FOQUALE network is to support young people to re-engage in positive learning (European Commission, 2013, p. 34).

Furthermore, local platforms are supplied with information from the SIEI (*Système interministériel d'échanges d'informations*). The SIEI collects data from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Agriculture schools, as well as Apprentice Training Centres, and the 'Missions locales' (access points for employment services for people under 25 years of age). It allows for the production of nominative lists of early school leavers twice a year. Access to the data is highly restricted; the system is only accessible via secure software by the heads of the local Platforms which re-group all actors active with early school leavers and disengaged learners within a certain territory. The SIEI provides information, which is useful for the follow-up of the young person, and has contributed to increased awareness and understanding of early school leaving processes (European Commission, 2013, p. 35).

As concerns measures to prevent early school leaving via support for educational orientation, in France the choice between academic and vocational education at the end of lower secondary education is taken by the school principal after a dialogue with the pupil and his/her family. To ensure that family and pupil wishes are taken into account by the time the pupil is 18 years of age, a trial has been launched in 117 schools aimed at enabling families and pupils to have the final say in the decision-making process. The lack of choice is considered to be one factor leading to early school leaving, since pupils are obliged to take a route that does not necessarily correspond to their aspirations. The trial is expected to have an impact also on teaching and assessment styles (European Commission, 2013, p. 37).

In France, '*Microlycées*' operate in some upper secondary schools (lycées), where they have a dedicated space. These prepare students who have not attended school for at least six months for the baccalaureate. Students are typically between 16 and 25 years of age, and, while their reasons for dropout vary, they all need to rebuild confidence in themselves and in their ability to learn. The focus on mentoring also helps students to identify their aims, understand their development needs and cope with their problems. Teachers work closely with the students, have additional pedagogical tasks and are strongly involved in mentoring individual students. The support work provided to students is very intense (regular meetings with individual students, follow-up of absenteeism, common room for teachers and students, no separate teachers' room). In addition, teaching is more interdisciplinary and teachers often work in pairs. There is a stronger focus on teamwork among the teachers, with experimental and innovative teaching styles and small learning groups. *Microlycées* are staffed with full-time teachers and a psychologist; they organise exchanges between the teachers in the secondary school and in the *Microlycée* itself. An important characteristic of the *Microlycée* is also flexibility in terms of timetables and approaches to learning – for example, with more opportunities to learn in workshops together with the possibility to choose between different workshops and receive personalised support for missed homework (European Commission, 2013, p. 44-45).

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