



# The Vocation above All. Portrait of Students Who Prepare the Competitive Exam of Primary School Teachers

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## Abstract

*In the context of french reform of recruitment and teacher training, and in a more general way, reform of school, we have tried to identify who are the students who prepare for the primary school teacher competitive exam. To conduct this research, we have spent a questionnaire to students preparing a Master degree and the competitive exam in a Teacher Training University Institute. The profiles of the candidates, their background, although different, are relatively homogeneous. Attracted to this profession of primary school teacher by vocation, work with children, and perform a useful social function are the main reasons moved forward to justify the professional choice of the primary education.*

## 1. Introduction

In France, the primary school has become a national priority. The government bill for the rebuilding of the school, was recently adopted by the National Assembly. It is expected to recruit 60,000 teachers who will soon be trained in the Graduate Schools of Teaching and Education (ESPE).

Since 2010, the number of candidates for the primary school teaching collapsed in France, passing, in 2010, 66,461 enrolled in the competitive examination, 35,646 registered in 2011 and 37,018 in 2012. One reason for this decline of applicants is attributed to 2010 reform about recruitment and training of new teachers. Since this date, one must be a Master's degree (or its equivalent) in order to enrol at recruitment of school teacher.

In this context of transformation of the methods of recruitment, we made the assumption that an identity transformation would be possibly observed among the public of the candidates to the primary school teaching .

In recent decades, several sociological researches has been conducted on primary school teachers [1] like the second degree [2]. Investigations about new generations of teachers showed that this population was somewhat different with a new relationship at work [3]. In a previous research on the identity of primary school teachers, we had identified three reasons becoming a primary school teacher (4): one could choose the occupation by vocation, by opportunism (as an alternative to another work), or either by resignation, failure or disappointment.

What about today? In this transition period, we wanted to know who are the students now choosing the occupation of primary school teacher?

The theoretical framework of the research stems from sociology, and the main theoretical reference that the "double deal" was developed by the French sociologist C.Dubar (1991). For this sociologist, social identity is the product of an interaction between the individual and the institutions they help each other to evolve.

## 2. Methodology.

To carry out our research, we have send a questionnaire by e-mail to all the students who prepared a Master's degree at the Teacher Training University Institute of High Normandy, after the results of the competition 2011. 43 exploitable questionnaires were received, that is to say a rate of answers from approximately 10%. Without being representative of the whole of the candidates, the results of this investigation can be however regarded as significant of what are the candidates for this competitive exam.

The questionnaire included both open and closed questions and was designed to gather various components of the identity of these candidates. It was asked, through open-ended questions to candidates, to trace their schooling and the curriculum followed in higher education, then detailing the route that led them to be college graduates, to obtain their views on the preparation for the competitive



exam and the profession of primary school teacher. Finally, they were also asked about the attractiveness of the teaching profession in primary school and the vision of their future careers. Who are these candidates?

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 Candidates are mainly women, from the middle class, residing in the regional education authority.**

Candidates are mostly female candidates. Candidates who responded to the questionnaire are almost half of the graduates of Master 1 (47%) and almost half of Master 2 (53%). Among Master's degree graduates only a small minority won the competition (22%).

Recruitment is mainly regional, all candidates interviewed are living in the three departments that make up the regional education authority.

These candidates are young overall, with a majority of young people under 25 years old. Take this competitive exam seems to be a part of a logical course of studies, followed by a linear fashion.

On the side of social origin, we find that candidates to primary school teaching occupation belong primarily to the middle class with about a third of them who are children of employees, and a quarter of them have a father who is a middle or senior executive. Among the candidates who have a spouse, also for a third of them, the spouse has the status of employee. Second element which corroborates this membership to the middle class: becoming a primary school teacher is seen as a maintaining inside the social class of origin for more than half of the candidates. Finally, the third element which seems to confirm the membership of the middle class: a comparison of the primary school teaching occupation with other occupations perceived as similar in social space. According to our candidates, nurse, social worker, psychologist, accountant, secretary, teacher are indeed professions considered similar to that of a primary school teacher on the scale of professions values.

#### **3.2 Candidates are former good students, who were well disposed to school and who wanted to become teacher.**

Candidates have happy memories of the school. When they were child, more than half of them had planned to become a teacher. Among the candidates who thought about the teaching profession, in the majority of the cases, studies in the literary field (literature, history, language ..) was taken upon entry into higher education. With regard to the social background of candidates who, in their youth, wanted to become a teacher, we see clearly that they are mainly the children of employees. One can reasonably assume that the job security coupled with the social utility function of teaching careers, qualities presented and supported by a family line and / or environment line that values these aspects, may have been influence, although moderately, but even so influence the decision to choose the occupation of primary school teacher.

#### **3.3 Candidates have mostly, with more or less success, an university education in literary field.**

It may be noted that graduates of bachelor's degree in literary fields are over-represented among the candidates who responded to the survey, while graduates of bachelor's degree in scientific field representing a small part, and graduates of bachelor's degree on economic and social fields are rare.

Then interviewed about their experiences of the past years in higher education, the opinions are divided, although the experience of higher education is felt more positively than negatively. Many candidates note that the way through the Teacher Training University Institute is a moment of rupture. And for many, compared to the University, the Teacher Training University Institute is a place where students are more supervised.

#### **3.4 Candidates follow a similar route, in pursuit of a common goal.**

Two-thirds of the candidates have already had peri-educational activities: coaching, help with homework, animation in children's outdoor activity centers, management of school workshops, or teaching in primary school in the private sector. Apart from these peri-educational activities, absolutely all candidates interviewed have experience of the working world. One notes that all those who are working while studying throughout the academic year, have an activity that takes place in the professional education or training field. We can therefore speak about a pre-professional education.



Few are candidates for primary schools teaching who have tried other contests of National Education, as if the candidates reserve their energy for the preparation of a single competitive exam. It can be assumed that prepare a primary school teachers competitive exam is a carefully considered choice, anticipated, and which rarely supports an alternative. Feedback from relatives of candidates with respect to their choice of the primary school teaching occupation are generally positive; education remains a great value for parents who emphasize the job security and the exercise of a useful job for society.

### **3.5 Candidates want a specialized institution for training, and taught by education professionals.**

The Teacher Training University Institute is recognized as the institution that provides the best preparation for competitive exams and teaching careers. According our candidates, another advantage of a Teacher Training University Institute : it offers work experience with professionals of education, in classrooms. Although in the university curriculum, training courses in classroom of primary and secondary are possible.

If the work experiences in primary schools are rewarding for candidates, it is because they can rub shoulders with experienced practitioners. Then, they think that teachers trainers (in classrooms and at the training center) are the categories of trainers, among the training staff, who best prepare for the professional realities of primary school teaching.

### **3.6 Candidates mention the difficulty of preparing the same time a diploma certificate and a competitive exam.**

We asked the candidates what they thought of the Master's dissertation as personal research work. It appears that the opinion about this intellectual activity is clearly negative. This dissertation is perceived primarily as a time-consuming task, especially in a year where the preparation for the competitive exam becomes important. It is also a work of long-term research, which requires a lot of investment in terms of labor, perceived as "poorly managed" by trainers, who also is deemed "unnecessary and ineffective." So, little positive judgments.

### **3.7 Candidates go into primary school teaching, first to work with children, while having the feeling to exercise a useful social function.**

When asked about their choice to opt , with skills and qualifications equivalent levels, to teach in primary schools rather than secondary schools, candidates evoke primarily their preference for working with children rather than teenagers. The second reason, more about the contents of work, is the versatility of disciplines. In fact, some candidates do not wish to teach the same discipline throughout their working life.

Asked about choosing among several proposed factors which were decisive in the choice of the teaching profession, more than half of the candidates mention at first the exercise of a useful social function. The factors most associated are respectively, in order: teach several disciplines, working with children, and be independent in their work. The second factor is the fact of working with children, which is praised, joining the choice to teach in the primary schools.

Thus, they are human values, who are, above all, the main reasons of the choice of this occupation of primary school teacher.

### **3.8 Candidates are moving towards this profession mostly by vocation and are considering exercise it for a long time to come.**

Three quarters of the candidates choose the vocation as being the main reason for choosing this teaching profession. The others are moving towards this profession by default or as an alternative to something else.

When they are asked about the vision of their future, we see that the choice of teaching is for candidates, thoughtful, and it is considered as a professional commitment that fits over the long term.

Thus, the five candidates who have passed the competition consider they will stay in teaching on long term.

To conclude, we can see at the end of this research, that among the whole candidates, emerge the idea that they all make every efforts to get into National Education, together with only a wish, if



successful at the competitive exam : settle down permanently in this primary school teaching profession.

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