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From Causality to the Living: Deconstructing the Notions of School Failure and Success in France; *Hearing* the Students

Mathilde Hasson

Saint Anne's College

University of Oxford

Supervisor: David Johnson

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Abstract

This dissertation offers a critical redefinition of the notions of academic success and failure in the French educational system, grounded in the perspectives of students themselves. In French sociology, these categories are often framed as systemic products of inequality, where merit is illusory and agency is structurally constrained (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Dubet, 2004; Lahire, 1995). While such analyses are essential to revealing mechanisms of reproduction, they risk obscuring the lived meanings students themselves ascribe to success and failure. At the same time, research in educational psychology has shown that these labels carry profound psycho-emotional consequences for students' self-concept and motivation (Dweck, 2006; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), underscoring the urgency of addressing how these notions are experienced and redefined by students.

Using an inductive, interpretivist methodology, the study draws on three in-depth semi-structured interviews with students from markedly different social and educational backgrounds. The analysis yields two key contributions. First, it reinterprets working-class students' attachment to meritocratic ideals, not as false consciousness—as frequently posited in French sociology; but as a situated and contextualised. Second, it identifies an urgent need, voiced by participants, to reorient evaluative practices beyond narrow academic indicators toward approaches that integrate emotional well-being, subjective meaning-making, and broader definitions of success and failure.

The central conceptual contribution is the framework of *situated merit*, which captures a form of educational agency that is context-sensitive, relational, and attuned to the lived conditions under which achievement is defined and recognised.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Presentation of the Research Topic

This dissertation critically redefines the notions of "success" and "failure" as they are mobilised within the French educational system. Far from being neutral descriptors of academic performance, these terms function as historically contingent, institutionally stabilised, and symbolically loaded classificatory devices. Their operationalisation in policy and pedagogical practice tends to obscure their ideological function and their performative effects on students' trajectories, identities, and self-perceptions. The central hypothesis of this work is that the definitions of success and failure currently in circulation are insufficiently attentive to the lived realities and epistemic perspectives of those who are most directly subjected to them. In response, this research seeks to articulate alternative understandings, grounded in the narratives of students themselves.

The overarching aim of this dissertation is not merely to describe or critique existing classifications, but to reconfigure the conditions under which students may emerge as epistemic subjects capable of speaking back to the system that names them.

Methodologically, this study adopts an inductive, interpretivist approach that positions students as active co-constructors of meaning. It is guided by Miranda Fricker's (2007) framework of epistemic justice, which foregrounds attentiveness to voices systematically marginalised or undervalued within dominant epistemic frameworks.

This chapter offers a preliminary clarification of several key terms that organise the conceptual architecture of the dissertation: *success and failure* (treated not as concepts in the strict philosophical sense, but as unstable, contested notions); *causality and the living*, which signal a shift from deterministic explanatory models to a more situated, phenomenological engagement with experience; *hearing*, understood both epistemologically and ethically; and finally, meritocracy and determinism, whose entanglement emerged during fieldwork as one of the most intellectually generative tensions across policy discourse, academic sociology, and students' own narratives. The chapter concludes with a reflexive account of the researcher's positionality and a detailed overview of the dissertation's structure.

1.2. Defining key terms

1.2.1 Success and Failure as Notions

This dissertation deliberately employs the term *notion* rather than *concept* to characterize "success" and "failure," thereby underscoring their epistemological indeterminacy and cultural plasticity. Etymologically derived from the Latin *notio*, the term denotes a preliminary or approximate form of knowledge, often contrasted in philosophical discourse with the *concept*, which refers to a more stable, systematic, and analytically refined construct (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991). The use of *notion* here is methodological: it enables a critical interrogation of categories that, while lacking fixed definition, exert tangible effects on individuals' lives. The abstract nature of these notions belies their concrete impact on students' educational experiences.

Indeed, the meanings ascribed to success and failure are far from universal. They are historically contingent and culturally situated, varying across societies, institutions, and subjective experiences. Yet paradoxically, these notions are often reified within educational systems as objective, measurable, standardized, and operational categories. In the French school system, for instance, to classify a student as successful or failing often requires nothing more than consulting their academic grades; performance becomes the primary proxy for success. Institutionalized as classificatory tools, these notions acquire the authority of neutrality and legitimacy. As Dubet (2004) argues, the French education system constructs justice not through recognition of diverse student experiences or needs, but through mechanisms of selection that portray themselves as fair. Success is framed as the just reward of merit, while failure appears as its logical absence, thus obscuring the structural conditions that shape students' trajectories. This legitimizing function of schooling, which masks inequality under the guise of equal opportunity, is further unpacked by Bourdieu and Passeron (1970), who demonstrate how the school converts arbitrary cultural hierarchies into seemingly naturalized measures of merit. In doing so, educational classifications such as success and failure reinforce social stratification while maintaining the ideological fiction of meritocracy.

In this sense, although success and failure lack conceptual clarity, their performative power is undeniable. These notions structure students' life paths, shape their sense of self, and influence their access to educational and professional futures. The symbolic violence they enact operates precisely through their presumed neutrality, through the illusion that they

merely register pre-existing inequalities rather than actively producing and legitimizing them (Bourdieu, 1993).

This dissertation begins from the premise that the apparent self-evidence of these terms must be suspended. To objectify success and failure as universally applicable and intrinsically meaningful is to obscure their normative and regulatory functions, as well as their entrenchment in broader systems of power. The challenge, then, is to critically examine how notions so epistemologically imprecise have come to exert such determinative force over the lives of students. Despite their conceptual instability, they function as powerful instruments of selection and exclusion in contemporary French education.

1.2.2 Success and Failure as interdependent categories

The study of the notion of success or failure cannot be approached in isolation. As Raymond McDermott (1997) argues, school failure is not merely the absence of success, nor is it a neutral outcome of individual performance. Rather, success and failure are co-produced within the same institutional and cultural processes. They form a binary relation that sustains the logic of schooling as a sorting mechanism.

McDermott insists that “failure is not a property of the child but of the social system,” and that both failure and success are actively achieved through normalized educational practices. In this sense, success is not a natural or neutral benchmark; it gains its cultural and symbolic power precisely because others are defined as having failed. “Those who are successful in school make possible - and are made possible by - those who fail” (McDermott, 1997).

In line with this reasoning, this dissertation approaches success and failure not as opposite outcomes on a linear scale, but as mutually constitutive categories, sustained by institutional logics, societal expectations, and policy frameworks. By treating them as interdependent, the research moves away from a deterministic or moralizing framework and instead opens space to question how students are positioned, categorized, and responded to within the school system.

1.2.3 From Causality to the Living

The title *From Causality to the Living* signals a deliberate theoretical reorientation: from analysing educational success and failure through deterministic, causal, and systemic

frameworks, to engaging with them as lived, embodied, and situated experiences. This shift emphasizes students not merely as objects of explanatory models but as epistemic agents; knowers of their own trajectories, whose experiences merit theoretical and political recognition.

French educational research on failure (*échec scolaire*) has been predominantly concerned with identifying and unpacking its structural causes. The bulk of the literature has focused on socio-economic determinism, institutional stratification, and the mechanisms of reproduction (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Prost, 1992; Merle, 2002). While this body of work has been necessary in revealing the systemic nature of educational inequality, it has paid comparatively less attention to the ontological status of success and failure as categories; how these notions are constructed, legitimized, and experienced in situ.

Rooted in the meritocratic ideals and republican universalism of the French education system, much of this literature implicitly affirms the legitimacy of prevailing school norms. Failure is often framed as the result of a misalignment between a student's habitus and the expectations of the school, while success is equated with the acquisition of dominant cultural codes. The response from policy and research has thus largely focused on remediation: providing additional resources and support, such as through the *Réseaux d'Éducation Prioritaire* (REP) policy, so that disadvantaged students might access the same symbolic capital as their privileged peers. This approach, exemplified in Bourdieu's analysis of the *pédagogie rationnelle* (Bourdieu, 1993), seeks to compensate for inequality without questioning the normative foundations of success itself. The codes of the dominant class are upheld as universal, while the meanings and experiences of success and failure remain unexamined.

In this framework, success and failure are effectively naturalized outcomes of a student's socio-economic status. If a student fails, the explanation lies in their lack of resources or distance from the dominant culture; if they succeed, it is attributed to inherited privilege. Such causal framing, while analytically necessary, tends to erase student agency, overlook subjective meaning-making, and marginalize narratives of resistance or reappropriation. As Lahire (1995) and Dubet (2002) observe in different ways, approaches that treat educational outcomes as primarily determined by socio-economic status risk overlooking the heterogeneity of student trajectories and the ways in which individuals navigate, reinterpret, or resist institutional logics.

This dissertation does not deny the overwhelming evidence linking socio-economic status to educational trajectories, France remains one of the OECD countries where social origin most strongly predicts academic success (OECD, 2016). However, it contends that an exclusive focus on structural causality fails to capture the experiential dimension of schooling. In returning to the "living", to the embodied, emotional, and reflexive experiences of students, this study aims to reframe failure not simply as a consequence of structural exclusion, but as a space of tension, negotiation, and potential re-signification.

1.2.4 Hearing

This dissertation adopts the concept of *hearing* as articulated by Aliya Khalid (2022), who reconceptualizes silence not as a deficit or absence, but as a deliberate, agentive strategy. Drawing from her work with Pakistani mothers navigating structural constraints, Khalid argues that *hearing* requires a methodological and ethical attentiveness to what remains unsaid in research encounters. Rather than privileging speech alone as the primary vehicle of meaning, *hearing* demands a deeper epistemological openness, one that considers silence as an intentional mode of expression, shaped by power, positionality, and resistance.

This orientation resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) seminal critique of how dominant discourses often subsume, distort, or erase the voices of the marginalized. Spivak warns that even well-meaning efforts to "give voice" risk reproducing the very hierarchies they aim to dismantle, unless one remains critically attuned to the conditions under which speaking is rendered possible or impossible. In this light, silence may not signify voicelessness, but rather a refusal to speak within the terms of a hegemonic framework. *Hearing*, then, becomes an ethical-political stance that acknowledges the limits of representation and seeks to preserve the opacity of certain experiences, rather than forcing them into legible form.

Within this dissertation, *hearing* serves as both methodological commitment and analytical lens. By attending to students' narratives of success and failure, including their pauses, hesitations, and silences, this study rejects the positivist tendency to equate knowledge with verbal articulation or statistical visibility. Instead, it affirms students as epistemic agents whose ways of knowing may be affective, fragmented, or tacit.

1.2.5 Determinism and Meritocracy

Two further notions central to this dissertation are *determinism* and *meritocracy*. While the political and institutional rhetoric in France continues to promote a vision of the school as a meritocratic space - where success is presumed to result from individual effort and talent - this narrative is increasingly contradicted by decades of sociological research. The French *Code de l'éducation* itself explicitly inscribes the principle of equal opportunity (*égalité des chances*), reaffirming the Republican ideal that school should serve as a neutral space for the identification and reward of merit (Code de l'éducation, 2022, Art. L111-1). However, this normative framework has been systematically problematised by educational sociologists.

As early as *Les Héritiers*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) exposed the deeply reproductive function of the French school system, arguing that academic "merit" often reflects inherited cultural capital more than individual ability. In this light, the school appears not as a leveller of inequalities, but as a powerful institution of symbolic reproduction that conceals its mechanisms of exclusion under the legitimising discourse of meritocracy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). This contradiction between the ideal of merit and the empirical persistence of social reproduction lies at the heart of what Dubet (2004) calls the "paradoxe méritocratique": the more the school claims to function on the basis of individual merit, the more it obscures the structural determinants that constrain educational outcomes.

The injustice arises precisely from this tension: students are judged and classified as if they operate on a level playing field, when in fact their trajectories remain deeply shaped by socio-economic origin, race, gender, and territory (van Zanten, 2009; Merle, 2002). Thus, the ideology of meritocracy, rather than correcting inequalities, contributes to their legitimisation by attributing failure to individual deficiency rather than systemic constraint. This dissertation takes this paradox as a critical entry point to examine how success and failure function as socially contingent and politically loaded classifications, whose performative power rests in their perceived neutrality.

1.2.6 Meritocracy and Determinism in French Educational Sociology

What emerges from both the French sociological literature and the empirical findings of this study is a paradoxical distribution of meritocratic and deterministic discourses across

social classes, one that is particularly revealing in the French context. While official state rhetoric continues to promote *l'égalité des chances* as a central pillar of the Republican school system (Code de l'éducation, 2022), sociological analyses since *Les Héritiers* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964) have consistently shown that the school contributes to the reproduction of social hierarchies under the guise of meritocracy. Yet, scholars such as van Zanten (2009), Merle (2002), and Lahire (1995) point out that this dominant narrative is not internalized uniformly: while the institutional discourse of meritocracy is omnipresent, it is often among the most socially precarious students and families that one finds the strongest attachment to its ideals.

This inversion is striking. In their efforts to succeed despite adversity, students from working-class or racialized backgrounds frequently express a belief in effort, perseverance, and school as a vehicle for upward mobility. However, French educational sociology has typically interpreted this belief not as a reflection of situated reasoning or hope, but as a psychological or symbolic defence. Lahire (1995), for instance, describes meritocracy as a "croyance nécessaire" that allows students to make sense of repeated school-based humiliations without fully confronting the structural constraints they face. In this framing, belief in meritocracy becomes a form of *refoulement social*, a denial of reality in the service of psychic equilibrium.

While this reading is analytically powerful, it raises a critical issue: to what extent does the French sociology of education risk negating the epistemic agency of the very students it seeks to defend? Unlike Anglophone traditions that have increasingly emphasized subaltern perspectives, resistance, and meaning-making (e.g., Scott, 1990; Fraser, 2000), French structuralist traditions have been slower to recognize the discursive agency of subordinated actors. Indeed, by reading their meritocratic aspirations as illusions or internalized domination, there is a danger of reproducing a form of epistemic paternalism. The students' own rationalities, grounded in emotional survival, cultural negotiation, or moral worth, are too often subsumed under explanatory logics that frame them as naive or ideologically misled.

This dissertation takes a different stance: rather than dismissing meritocratic belief as a false consciousness, it seeks to understand it as a situated, embodied, and potentially ambivalent response to a profoundly unequal system. The aim is not to idealize this belief, but to recognize it as an expression of agency.

1.3 Positionality and Structure

1.3.1 Positionality

My motivation for undertaking this research stems from my own trajectory as a student within the French education system. Over the course of my schooling, I was assigned a range of labels - from being a high-performing student in primary school to being classified as a failing and disengaged pupil during secondary education. In the span of seven years, I attended six different schools, and was marked not only by academic underachievement but also by a growing detachment from a system I perceived as judgmental rather than supportive.

This disengagement was not the result of a lack of motivation or interest in learning. My personal and familial circumstances, particularly growing up with a single mother facing long-term illness, created barriers that were not adequately understood or accommodated by the school system. My experience is emblematic of a broader issue: the way institutional interpretations of success and failure often overlook the complex social and emotional realities students face.

While I ultimately managed to navigate the system and access higher education, I recognize that this outcome was shaped not only by individual resilience but also by the economic capital available to me. I am acutely aware that another student, with similar capacities but lacking financial support, may not have been afforded the same opportunities. In this respect, my trajectory overlaps with those of my participants in having experienced the weight and volatility of success/failure labels, yet diverges significantly in the material, cultural, and institutional resources I could draw upon. This distance informs my interpretation: it requires me to approach participants' accounts with attentiveness to both shared understandings and the asymmetries in our positionalities, guarding against conflation and over-identification.

My position in this study is therefore twofold. First, I speak from lived experience of the institutional and symbolic effects of being named a "success" or a "failure." Second, I am driven by a broader ethical and political commitment to educational justice. This dissertation is rooted in a desire to challenge the structural conditions that marginalize certain students, and to contribute to a rethinking of how we define, interpret, and respond to educational failure and success.

1.3.2 Structure

The structure of this dissertation reflects its inductive and interpretivist orientation.

The literature review that follows situates the study within a broader historical and theoretical landscape, tracing how the categories of success and failure have been constructed and contested; particularly within the French universalist tradition.

The third chapter sets out the methodological and ethical foundations of the research, detailing the qualitative tools employed and justifying the participatory, student-centred design.

The fourth chapter turns to the empirical material, offering a close analysis of students' narratives to reveal how they negotiate, resist, or reframe dominant definitions of success and failure. Rather than progressing linearly toward a definitive conclusion, the structure is designed to open space for new meanings to emerge from students' lived experiences, and to critically reconfigure the terms through which they are named.

Chapter 2: Literature review

What are the philosophical and political underpinnings of the notions of failure and success in the French educational landscape? How have these notions evolved historically, from the Belle Époque to the present, and how are they reflected in contemporary macro-systemic discourses, both intellectual and political? What kinds of subjectivities do these frameworks produce, and how is the student constructed as a subject within them? Finally, how does the current French academic literature conceptualize success and failure, and what gaps remain in the scholarly understanding of these notions?

Introduction

This literature review provides a critical and historically situated exploration of the notions of school success and failure within the French educational system. It adopts a narrative and critical-historical review approach, aiming not only to synthesize existing scholarship but also to interrogate the ideological, political, and epistemological foundations of evaluative practices that shape the meaning and function of success and failure. In line with the ontological and axiological commitments of this study, the review foregrounds the production of subjectivities; asking how students are imagined, governed, and interpellated through normative discourses of merit, value, and failure.

The review begins by situating its inquiry in the *Belle Époque* (c. 1879–1914), when compulsory schooling was instituted and the French Republican school model was formalized. This historical anchoring allows for an examination of the philosophical foundations (i.e. *universalism, laïcité, and égalité des chances*) that continue to structure the educational imaginary and legitimize its classificatory mechanisms. The analysis then traces the evolution of the notions of success and failure from the post-war period to the present, through key policy reforms and the increasing influence of international accountability regimes. It then turns to contemporary political and intellectual discourses that mobilize meritocratic ideals, often under the guise of neutrality, while reproducing structural inequalities. This is followed by an examination of how the student is constituted as an economic, moral, and epistemic subject within these overlapping institutional and symbolic frameworks. The chapter concludes by mapping the current research landscape on success

and failure in French education, identifying significant limitations, particularly the lack of epistemological inquiry into the construction of these notions and the marginalization of student voice, to which this study seeks to contribute.

This review reveals that the meanings of success and failure in French education have shifted from collective civic ideals toward individualized and performative logics. The student is increasingly constructed as a measurable subject, held responsible for outcomes shaped by deeply rooted structural conditions. Crucially, the literature, when read critically, suggests that students themselves, regardless of their social position, are largely absent from the theorization of these categories. Whether privileged or marginalized, their lived experiences and perspectives are rarely treated as epistemically valuable or capable of contesting dominant definitions of success and failure. These insights highlight the need to reconceptualize failure as a lived, situated, and potentially generative experience, foregrounding the perspectives of those who are most directly subjected to its institutional and symbolic consequences.

2.1 Philosophical and Ideological Foundations (Belle Époque to post-war)

The educational reforms initiated by Jules Ferry in the early 1880s constituted not merely an administrative restructuring of schooling in France but an ideological re-foundation of the Republic itself. Through the laws of 1881 and 1882, which established free, compulsory, and secular education, the Third Republic positioned the *école* as a primary vehicle for producing republican subjectivity. As Prost (1982) demonstrates, these reforms were deeply political: the school was not only a place of instruction but a tool for consolidating the authority of the state, moralizing the citizenry, and forging national unity. The republican school was tasked with homogenizing the nation and legitimizing the state, functions that remain embedded in the contemporary French educational landscape.

At the heart of Ferry's project lies the republican ideal of universalism, which posits that the Republic recognizes only abstract individuals and not particular identities. Within this ideological architecture, education was to function as a mechanism of equalization: by stripping children of their social, religious, and regional particularities, the school could produce equal subjects of law, thus operationalizing the principle of *égalité des chances*. Yet,

as Alary (2022) and Prost (1982) both argue, this universalizing posture required a radical abstraction of the child, one that denied the legitimacy of embodied difference in the name of civic sameness. In so doing, it inaugurated what might be termed a *pedagogical erasure*,a deliberate disarticulation of children from their lived contexts in order to align them with a national epistemic norm.

This norm was not neutral. Rather, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) would later demonstrate, it was structured by the habitus of the dominant classes - bourgeois, rationalist, and secular. The republican school's performative claim to neutrality masked a deeper cultural imposition, whereby the codes, dispositions, and linguistic forms valorized by elite fractions of society were transmuted into ostensibly universal standards. Success, in this context, was not merely academic achievement but symbolic assimilation; failure was not lack of intelligence but misrecognition of a student's refusal or inability to conform to invisible normative expectations.

The secularism institutionalized through laïcité further reinforced this epistemic regime. While ostensibly concerned with protecting public instruction from ecclesiastical influence, laïcité in practice evolved into a disciplinary dispositif, what Foucault (1975) might call a *microphysics of power*, that regulated not only belief but also expression, comportment, and affect. In producing the "secular subject," the school delegitimized alternative epistemologies - religious, oral, communal - rendering them irrelevant or even dangerous within the educational field (Baubérot, 2012). Here, laïcité did not merely separate church and state; it enacted a form of epistemic policing, consolidating the state's monopoly over what counted as legitimate knowledge and expression.

Moreover, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) argued, the principle of *égalité des chances*, far from mitigating social inequality, has often served to naturalize educational hierarchies under the guise of merit. Once schooling became universally accessible, the institution could be positioned as a level playing field, allowing structural disparities to be reframed as individual failings. The logic of causality thus shifted: if education was presumed equal, inequality of outcomes could only be attributed to differences in effort, talent, or will. This *illusion méritocratique*, a concept later revisited by Duru-Bellat (2009), remains a cornerstone of the French educational imaginary, enabling systemic inequalities to be disavowed in favour of a moral economy of individual responsibility.

Ferry republicanism established a foundational contradiction: it universalized access while particularizing success. It promised emancipation through schooling, but did so by

demanding conformity to a dominant cultural model. It secularized instruction, but in so doing, delegitimized plurality of knowledges. These contradictions remain inscribed in the contemporary grammar of failure and success in France, whose normative force derives not from empirical necessity but from a historical and ideological legacy that continues to shape the very terms through which students are judged.

2.2 Chronosystemic Evolution of Failure and Success (1880–2020s)

The trajectory of the French educational system since the Third Republic reveals a gradual yet decisive transformation in how success and failure are institutionalized, interpreted, and operationalized. From the post-Ferry era through the reforms of the Fifth Republic and into the era of globalized benchmarking, the notions of *échec scolaire* (school failure) and *réussite scolaire* (school success) have evolved in concert with shifting political rationalities, demographic pressures, and epistemic regimes. This section traces these transformations across four critical phases.

2.2.1 The Berthoin Reform (1959) and the Massification of Schooling

The Berthoin Reform of 1959 marked a paradigmatic shift in the structure of French secondary education. By raising the compulsory schooling age to sixteen and abolishing early selection into distinct educational tracks, the reform aimed to democratize access to secondary education. This expansion reflected the state's response to post-war economic modernization and the demographic boom, but it also recalibrated the implicit definition of failure. Where previously the termination of education at age fourteen had been normalized, the reform redefined non-progression through the collège as a new form of deficit (Prost, 1992).

While the reform ostensibly sought to promote equality, it reproduced social hierarchies through the persistence of implicit selection mechanisms - particularly through streaming within collège unique and unequal access to academic capital. As Merle (2002) argues, the extension of schooling paradoxically exposed more students to the risk of failure by universalizing standards rooted in elite pedagogical expectations. In this new context, success was increasingly equated with normative progression through the school system, while failure became visible as deviance from a standardized educational trajectory.

2.2.2 The Emergence of Échec Scolaire as a Public Problem (1970s–1980s)

The 1970s saw the institutional consolidation of échec scolaire as a category of policy concern and public discourse. Driven by concerns over rising youth unemployment, the failure of mass education to deliver promised mobility, and the growing visibility of urban and migrant marginalization, educational failure became problematized not merely as an individual or familial issue but as a systemic crisis of the school's legitimacy (Ben Ayed, 2010).

This discursive shift culminated in the establishment of the Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire (ZEP) in 1981, a policy aimed at redistributing resources toward schools in disadvantaged areas. Inspired by principles of positive discrimination, the ZEP policy implicitly acknowledged structural inequality but did not fundamentally challenge the normative frameworks of success. Rather, it sought to compensate for disadvantage so that students might better conform to dominant expectations (van Zanten, 2009). In this sense, ZEP functioned as a corrective dispositif - a form of institutional remediation that left untouched the cultural and epistemic hierarchies embedded in the curriculum and assessment regimes.

Moreover, the very identification of "priority" zones instituted new forms of symbolic and spatial labeling, whereby students and schools became marked as at risk or deficient, a process that Dubet (2002) describes as the "territorialization of failure." Thus, even as the state sought to address inequality, it simultaneously entrenched new mechanisms of surveillance and classification, foregrounding institutional metrics over lived educational experiences.

2.2.3 Post-2000 Reforms: Accountability, Standardization, and the Global Metrics Regime

The early 21st century ushered in a new phase of governance marked by international benchmarking, data-driven accountability, and policy borrowing - epitomized by the rising influence of OECD-led assessments such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). France's engagement with the PISA regime from 2000 onward rearticulated

failure in technocratic terms: not merely as a domestic issue but as a comparative deficit in international performance rankings (Carvalho, 2009).

This reconfiguration of failure as governable through metrics signaled a profound epistemological transformation. Success became increasingly associated with standardized test scores, employability indicators, and measurable outputs. Consequently, policy discourses began to emphasize efficiency, evidence-based interventions, and best practices, drawing on managerial logics more familiar to corporate governance than to emancipatory education (Normand, 2016).

Within this paradigm, the teacher's role was redefined as an implementer of externally validated strategies, and the student as a data point within a vast evaluative apparatus. As Meuret (2001) notes, this shift toward performance-based management reduced the semantic richness of educational success to quantifiable outcomes, thereby marginalizing alternative conceptions grounded in ethical, relational, or cultural terms.

2.2.4 From Collective Uplift to Individual Performance: A Regressive Turn

Across these successive phases, from Berthoin to PISA, the prevailing logic has shifted from one of collective uplift to one of individual accountability. Whereas earlier republican and social-democratic visions of schooling maintained a rhetorical commitment to the public good, contemporary reforms increasingly frame education as an individual investment in human capital. Within this neoliberal rationality, failure is not the result of systemic exclusion but of personal inadequacy; success is not civic integration but private optimization.

This shift is not merely policy-driven but ontological. The student-subject is now constituted as an autonomous, calculating agent responsible for navigating the educational field as a competitive marketplace. As Dardot and Laval (2009) argue, this entrepreneurial subjectivity aligns with broader trends in neoliberal governance, in which inequality is depoliticized and responsibilized.

The cumulative effect of this evolution is a discursive foreclosure of failure as a meaningful, interpretable, or agentive experience. It becomes a technical problem to be corrected, rather than a space of existential negotiation or social critique. In this sense, contemporary definitions of school failure are both narrower and more punitive than in previous decades, despite their apparent objectivity.

2.3 Macro-Systemic Discourses Today

The current French educational landscape is saturated with competing discourses that purport to define what constitutes failure and success. While presented as neutral or evidence-based, these discourses are in fact deeply ideological; reinscribing long-standing republican values, technocratic rationalities, and neoliberal logics. This section examines the macro-systemic production of meaning around *échec scolaire* and *réussite scolaire* by analysing (1) political discourses and policy frameworks, (2) intellectual interventions, and (3) the influence of institutional epistemic authorities such as think tanks and international organizations.

2.3.1 Political Discourses: "Égalité des Chances"

The rhetoric of *égalité des chances* (equal opportunities) remains a central tenet of French educational policy, invoked to legitimize a wide range of reforms. However, its meaning has undergone significant semantic drift. Originally grounded in a republican ideal of equal civic worth, *égalité des chances* now functions increasingly as a compensatory mechanism aimed at mitigating the effects of socio-economic disparity without fundamentally challenging structural hierarchies (Duru-Bellat, 2009). In this sense, it operates less as a promise of justice than as a technology of legitimation, masking persistent inequality behind the discourse of opportunity.

The implementation of *Parcoursup* (the post-secondary selection platform introduced in 2018) exemplifies this shift. Marketed as a transparent and meritocratic tool for university admissions, *Parcoursup* operationalizes a highly codified system of evaluation that embeds institutional reputation, local school prestige, and algorithmic sorting into the very criteria of selection (Couronné, 2020). It effectively displaces responsibility for exclusion onto students themselves, who are encouraged to strategize their choices and optimize their trajectories. Here, failure is not structurally determined but individually incurred.

This ideological orientation was further cemented under the tenure of Jean-Michel Blanquer, Minister of National Education (2017–2022), whose policy agenda emphasized *ordre, mérite, et excellence républicaine*. Blanquer's reforms reasserted centralized control, valorized traditional academic hierarchies, and reintroduced forms of early selection, such as the reform of the *baccalauréat* and the resegmentation of vocational pathways. While framed

as “restoring the authority of the school,” these policies deepened the divide between normative and non-normative educational trajectories, reinforcing a binary of deserving and undeserving students (Blanchard, 2021).

In sum, contemporary political discourses reproduce the categories of failure and success through managerial governance and meritocratic moralism. The state no longer assumes responsibility for inequality but reconfigures it as the product of student choice, effort, and merit.

2.3.2 Intellectual Discourses

Within academic discourse, a parallel transformation has occurred: a shift from collective responsibility to individual accountability. François Dubet’s (2004) influential work on the "individualization of educational injustice" articulates this transition with clarity. According to Dubet, the school no longer guarantees social mobility through collective systems of redistribution but places the onus on individuals to "construct their own path." Failure, in this schema, is the result of poor self-management, not structural constraint. The result is a double bind: students are required to be autonomous subjects in a system that systematically undermines autonomy through classification and hierarchy.

Philippe Meirieu (2001) provides a counterpoint by situating the teacher not merely as a transmitter of knowledge but as a *médiateur* - an ethical agent capable of transforming institutional logics through relational pedagogy. Yet, Meirieu’s optimism has been marginalized in recent years by a return to prescriptive curricula, performative assessments, and diminishing trust in teacher autonomy. His vision of education as a space for ethical becoming is increasingly incompatible with the audit culture permeating schools (Maroy, 2006).

The work of Roland Plaisance (1999) calls attention to the ontological status of the child within the French system. He argues that the republican imaginary constructs the child primarily as a future citizen - a latent subject to be molded - rather than as a present being with valid experiences and knowledges. This asymmetrical temporality reinforces hierarchical relations in which students are perpetually becoming but never being. It delegitimizes the epistemic authority of the child, particularly those whose trajectories deviate from expected norms of academic success.

These intellectual positions crystallize a fundamental and unresolved aporia within modern educational theory: the tension between assimilation and emancipation. Rooted in Enlightenment rationalism, the republican school project enshrines a vision of education as a process of universalization, wherein the child is abstracted from their singular conditions in order to be integrated into the civic order. This model reflects the Kantian imperative of *sapere aude* - to "dare to know" - which positions education as the pathway through which the individual exits their self-imposed immaturity and becomes an autonomous moral agent. Yet the historical realization of this ideal, particularly in the French context, has often equated autonomy with conformity, collapsing emancipation into assimilation through the disciplinary technologies of the state.

Conversely, thinkers such as John Dewey (1916) and Paulo Freire (1970) have insisted on education as a dialogic and situated process, one that must attend to the learner's context, experience, and agency. For Dewey, education is not the transmission of fixed content but the reconstruction of experience in light of democratic inquiry; for Freire, it is the practice of freedom - a pedagogy that refuses to objectify the learner and instead foregrounds their capacity to name the world. Within this philosophical field, the French model reveals its paradox: while invoking the language of emancipation (*égalité des chances*, *la raison*), it often operates through structures of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970), where normative judgments of success and failure conceal the reproduction of social hierarchies.

2.3.3 Epistemic Authorities: CNESCO, OCDE, and the Governance of Evidence

Beyond the political and intellectual field, the discursive construction of success and failure is increasingly shaped by institutional epistemic authorities such as CNESCO (Conseil national d'évaluation du système scolaire) and the OECD. These bodies position themselves as objective evaluators, producing reports and indicators that inform national policy. Yet their metrics and frameworks are far from neutral.

The OECD's PISA assessments, in particular, have imposed a global grammar of schooling (Grek, 2009), wherein success is narrowly defined through literacy, numeracy, and scientific reasoning, and failure is quantified through standardized rankings. This has profound implications for national policymaking: educational priorities are reoriented around

improving international performance rather than addressing local injustices. As Normand (2016) shows, such external benchmarking produces a *regime of truth* in which deviation from the global norm is interpreted as technical failure requiring managerial correction.

CNESCO, while more contextually grounded, also operates within this technocratic logic. Its emphasis on "what works" in pedagogy and policy tends to favour interventions that are measurable, scalable, and depoliticized. Although CNESCO occasionally engages with issues of inequality and discrimination, these are typically framed in terms of access and outcomes, not as structural or epistemological critiques. As such, the systemic reproduction of failure is rendered visible only to the extent that it can be diagnosed and corrected through targeted interventions.

Macro-systemic discourses today reflect a convergence of technocratic rationality and neoliberal subjectivation. Political, intellectual, and institutional actors frame failure not as the product of unjust structures, but as a manageable deviation in the optimization of educational pathways. Success is defined narrowly, assessed numerically, and moralized ideologically. The student is simultaneously governed as a subject of rights, a bearer of potential, and a risk to be managed.

2.4 The Construction of the Student as Subject

The question of school failure and success cannot be meaningfully addressed without interrogating the implicit image of the student that these categories presuppose and reproduce. Who is the student imagined, governed, and addressed by the French educational system? What modes of subjectivity are made possible, desirable, or impossible within its institutional and discursive logics?

Drawing from critical theory and the sociology of education, this section explores how the student has been historically constructed in three overlapping registers: as an economic actor to be optimized, a moral subject to be evaluated, and - more tentatively - an epistemic agent whose knowledge and lived experience are increasingly invoked but structurally marginalized. These regimes of subjectification are not discrete but co-constitutive; they operate through institutional apparatuses, symbolic classifications, and pedagogical expectations that shape the student as a knowable and governable figure.

2.4.1 The Student as Homo Economicus

In contemporary education policy, particularly under the influence of international benchmarking and neoliberal governance, the student is increasingly framed as homo economicus - an entrepreneurial subject whose value is measured by performance, adaptability, and future employability. Within this logic, education becomes an investment, and the student a portfolio of competencies to be optimized.

This economization of the subject is reflected in the proliferation of performance indicators, comparative rankings, and competency-based frameworks that reduce learning to quantifiable outcomes. Students are classified, compared, and increasingly held accountable for their own success or failure; processes that mirror the competitive logic of the market. As Althusser (1971) would frame it, the school functions as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that interpellates individuals as subjects of capitalism by reproducing the dispositions and stratifications required for the reproduction of labour.

Yet, unlike the worker in classical Marxism, the student is constituted not only by their productive potential but by their capacity to be ranked and selected. Foucault's (1975) concept of normalization is particularly salient here: through examinations, surveillance, and curricula, the student is subjected to a diffuse but pervasive power that produces hierarchies under the guise of neutrality. The modern school does not merely sort students, it constitutes them as statistical selves, whose worth is made legible through data and whose future is shaped by early classification.

2.4.2 The Student as Moral Agent: Merit, Deservingness, and Blame

Beyond economic rationality, the student is also constructed as a moral subject, one whose trajectory is interpreted through the lens of responsibility, effort, and deservingness. Success is not only a matter of achievement but of virtue; failure is often read as a lack of will, discipline, or parental investment.

This moralization of educational outcomes draws heavily from republican meritocratic ideals. The school is imagined as a fair arbiter of effort, where students succeed through diligence and fail through personal or familial insufficiency (Duru-Bellat, 2009). In this configuration, failure becomes not simply a misalignment between habitus and institutional norms (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970), but a moral verdict, one that attaches itself to the student's identity and future prospects.

Such moral framings are particularly violent in contexts of structural inequality, where students from racialized, working-class, or migrant backgrounds are disproportionately represented among those deemed "failing." As Lahire (2002) has shown, the school systematically misrecognizes the plurality of socialization paths and cultural resources that students bring, thereby attributing failure to individual deficiencies rather than structural misfits. The deserving/undeserving binary thus obscures the systemic nature of exclusion by re-inscribing it as a moral attribute of the subject.

2.4.3 The Student as Epistemic Agent: A Silenced Potential

If the economic and moral constructions of the student are hegemonic, the image of the student as an epistemic agent - a bearer of knowledge, meaning, and interpretive authority - remains marginal but increasingly invoked. This emerging figure challenges the traditional asymmetry between teacher and student, expert and layperson, policy and lived experience.

Drawing on Spivak's (1988) seminal question, *"Can the subaltern speak?"*, we might ask: *Can the student speak?* And more precisely: under what conditions is the student's speech recognized as knowledge rather than noise, testimony rather than failure, critique rather than deviance? The educational system, as currently constituted, rarely grants students the right to define the terms of their own success or failure. Their accounts are filtered through adult-centric discourses, instrumentalized for policy, or dismissed as anecdotal (Périer, 2005).

This marginalization of student voice is reinforced by dominant institutional definitions of educational "quality." Harvey and Green's (1993) influential typology delineates five prevalent understandings of quality: exceptionality, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation. The first four conceptions embed managerial and performative logics that cast students primarily as recipients of inputs or outputs of institutional efficiency, rather than co-constructors of meaning. While the "transformational" model gestures toward learner development, it often relies on standardized proxies such as employability or progression, thereby reducing the richness of educational experience to technocratic metrics.

In this framework, epistemic agency is eclipsed by epistemic compliance: the valuable student is not the one who questions but the one who performs. Success becomes synonymous with alignment: fitting the institutional purpose, meeting quality thresholds,

delivering value. The very notion of *voice* becomes functionalized, celebrated when it confirms institutional priorities and ignored when it disrupts them.

By contrast, Lahire's (1995; 2002) sociological work on plural socialization provides a more generative account of student agency. Rather than a unified habitus, the student inhabits multiple and sometimes contradictory dispositions shaped by school, family, peer cultures, and broader symbolic structures. Within this pluralism lies the potential for critical reflexivity: students navigate, reinterpret, and sometimes resist the scripts imposed upon them. Recognizing them as epistemic agents therefore requires not only listening, but cultivating institutional spaces where their modes of knowing are treated as legitimate, even when they fall outside dominant pedagogical grammars.

2.5 Rethinking Merit, Determinism, and the Failure Discourse

The trajectory traced in this review - from republican universalism to performative individualism - reveals not merely a shift in educational practice, but a transformation in the very architecture of value. Central to this transformation is the consolidation of meritocratic discourse as both a political justification and a normative horizon. In the French educational landscape, meritocracy is not merely a policy ideal; it is a cultural and ideological dispositif through which failure is rendered intelligible, legitimate, and morally acceptable.

The paradox at the heart of this discourse is striking. While the notion of *égalité des chances* continues to be a core rhetorical device in political and ministerial discourse, its invocation often conceals structural determinism rather than disrupts it. Success is framed as the outcome of effort, talent, and perseverance; failure, by contrast, is cast as a deficit of individual merit. This binary logic is evident in reforms such as *Parcoursup*, where selection mechanisms are presented as neutral instruments of fairness, yet systematically reproduce existing social hierarchies (van Zanten, 2018). Former Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer repeatedly emphasized "merit" and "effort" as organizing principles of the school system, claiming that republican rigor could overcome socio-economic disadvantage (Blanquer, 2018). However, such discourses operate as moral rationalizations for unequal distribution of resources and opportunity, shifting the burden of failure onto the individual.

Contrasting sharply with this political narrative, intellectual and sociological literature has long challenged the assumptions underpinning republican meritocracy. From Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970) seminal work on cultural reproduction to more recent analyses by

Dubet (2004), Meirieu (2007), and Broccolichi and Glasman (2004), scholars have consistently argued that meritocratic structures function less as vehicles of equality than as instruments of legitimation. The very idea of a fair school competition presupposes what Bourdieu calls the "illusion méritocratique," the belief that all students compete on equal footing, regardless of inherited capital. As Lahire (1995) further demonstrates, the school rewards dispositions that are unequally distributed across social classes, thus producing symbolic violence under the guise of impartiality.

The moral weight of merit also operates in the realm of educational governance, as evidenced in official reports from institutions such as CNESCO and the OECD. While often framed in technocratic language; referencing "efficacy," "performance," or "learning outcomes," these reports nonetheless reinforce a logic of accountability that privileges output over context. For instance, OECD reviews on France routinely suggest that equity can be achieved through targeted interventions within an otherwise neutral system, thereby avoiding a fundamental critique of the system's own hierarchical structure (OECD, 2015). The result is a depoliticized discourse that obfuscates the structural production of failure by framing it as an issue of measurable deficit rather than systemic design.

This convergence of political and institutional narratives constitutes what Pierre-Michel Menger (2022) identifies as the rehabilitation of meritocracy into a technocratic and moralized doctrine. Drawing on the original satirical use of the term by Michael Young (1958), Menger notes that what began as a critique of social closure has been transformed into a celebratory rhetoric of individual achievement. In France, this rhetoric is particularly powerful because it aligns with the universalist tradition that refuses to acknowledge difference as a legitimate basis for differentiated support. Thus, the failure of students from working-class or racialized backgrounds is not only tolerated but explained away through recourse to effort, attitude, or merit.

The contemporary discourse on school failure in France is shaped by a profound contradiction: it mobilizes the ideal of fairness to naturalize inequality. Political rhetoric relies on meritocratic narratives to legitimize increasingly selective policies, while critical research exposes these narratives as ideologically charged and empirically untenable. What is needed, then, is not simply more support for those who fail, but a fundamental deconstruction of the very criteria by which success and failure are defined. This dissertation contributes to that project by interrogating failure as a site of epistemic construction, rather than a neutral

outcome, and by revealing the normative operations that sustain its legitimacy in the current educational order.

2.6 Mapping the Contemporary Research Landscape

In contemporary educational research, school success and failure are most frequently approached through a quantitative and classificatory lens. Institutional actors such as the OECD, DEPP, and CNESCO define failure using indicators such as grade repetition, school dropout rates, and standardised test scores including PISA rankings (CNESCO 2018; OECD 2015). These metrics reflect a global logic of accountability and international comparison, where success is equated with system performance and economic competitiveness. Within this framework, students are treated as data points in a broader apparatus of performance governance (Laval 2003; Demeuse and Mons 2012).

A second strand of research, particularly prominent in Anglo-American contexts, focuses on individual characteristics such as motivation, resilience, and "grit" (Duckworth et al. 2007). Though less prevalent in France, these discourses have gained ground in recent policy rhetoric, reflecting a neoliberal turn that frames educational failure as a failure of self-regulation (O'Donnell 2014). This perspective often leads to interventions targeting students' executive functioning or mindset rather than addressing structural inequalities.
In contrast, the French research tradition has long been grounded in structuralist sociology. Seminal studies by Bourdieu and Passeron (1964), Forquin (1982), Broccolichi and Glasman (2004), and van Zanten (2018) have shown how school failure disproportionately affects working-class and racialised students, and how the institution contributes to the reproduction of social hierarchies under the ideological veil of meritocracy. This work has been essential in revealing the systemic nature of school-based inequality.

Yet several epistemological blind spots remain. First, success and failure are often treated as objective, stable categories rather than interrogated as historically and ideologically constructed notions (McDermott 1997). This limits the field's capacity to explore the symbolic, emotional, and normative dimensions of school experience. Second, and more centrally to this research, students' own voices, whether from privileged or precarious backgrounds, remain largely marginalised or instrumentalised. Even when present, they are often filtered through surveys or adult frameworks, rather than treated as epistemically valid expressions of meaning-making.

This absence is particularly acute for structurally vulnerable youth: students placed in foyers, under ASE care, or enrolled in REP and ZEP institutions. These students are not absent from the literature, but their testimonies are often re-inscribed within interpretive schemes rooted in remediation, risk prevention, or deviance. Forquin (1982) noted that sociological approaches in France often locate failure in social origin, family background, or cultural deficit, without interrogating the epistemic construction of the term "failure" itself. Even recent efforts to foreground student narratives, such as *Young People's Stories of School Failure and Remedial Trajectories* (Givord, Pons, Monseur and Roaux 2021), analyse youth accounts primarily through institutional lenses. While the study offers valuable cross-national insights, students' voices are mediated by researchers and practitioners whose conceptual frameworks shape what counts as meaningful discourse. As a result, students are rarely treated as theorists of their own experience, but rather as data to be explained.

This is not to suggest that the French research field is inattentive to inequality, it has contributed powerfully to its diagnosis. However, it remains less attentive to what Fricker (2007) calls epistemic justice: the recognition of marginalised individuals as knowers. In contrast, many Anglophone traditions in education, particularly in critical ethnography, feminist theory, and decolonial studies, have developed participatory and narrative approaches that centre subaltern meaning-making (Scott 1990; Fraser 2000). These traditions seek to understand how young people theorise their own trajectories, experiences of exclusion, or definitions of success and failure.

French sociology, by contrast, remains more tightly anchored in structuralist ambitions. Bernard Lahire (1995, 2002, 2012) has been at the forefront of a shift toward more plural and situated analyses. He calls for attention to intra-individual variation and the complexity of socialisation across contexts. Yet even Lahire expresses concern about what he sees as a disciplinary drift toward fascination with singularity at the expense of scientific generalisation. His ambivalence reflects a broader hesitation in French sociology to fully embrace inductive and narrative methodologies, particularly those that prioritise lived experience over structural causality.

This dissertation intervenes in that tension. It is informed by structural analysis but also seeks to reframe the role of student testimony within educational research. Drawing on interpretivist epistemology and a commitment to epistemic justice, it treats students not as passive respondents but as co-constructors of meaning. In doing so, it echoes Spivak's (1988) provocation,"Can the subaltern speak?" and reframes it within the French educational

context: can the student speak in a system where failure is institutionally defined and epistemically policed?

The question is not whether students speak, but whether their narratives are allowed to reconfigure the dominant categories that define success and failure. As long as the grammar of educational research remains structurally top-down, students, particularly those deemed “at risk”, will continue to be spoken about, rather than spoken with. This dissertation does not reject structural explanation, but seeks to enrich it through the careful inclusion of student meaning-making as a legitimate and vital form of knowledge.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research aim and research question

The overarching aim of this research is to examine how students engaged in the French educational system articulate and redefine the meanings of academic success and failure, not as empirical data points, but as producers of situated knowledge. By foregrounding students' interpretive labour, the project seeks to challenge institutional and scholarly assumptions about what constitutes educational value. The term 'students engaged in the French educational system' is used deliberately to encompass diverse school trajectories, social positions, and modes of participation. In doing so, this dissertation intervenes in the longstanding tension within French sociology between structuralist analyses of school success and failure and the imperative for epistemic justice. It positions the act of hearing, and taking seriously, students' own accounts as a necessary counterpoint to the dominant causal frameworks that have historically defined and policed failure and success. This inquiry was guided by one central research question:

> **How do students engaged in the French education system experience and define academic failure and success?**

3.2 Philosophical and Theoretical Underpinnings

This research is grounded in an interpretivist and inductive epistemology, which recognises students not as mere respondents or data sources but as legitimate epistemic agents. Rather than treating student narratives as illustrations of pre-existing theory, the study seeks to foreground their meaning-making practices as valid contributions to educational knowledge. In doing so, it departs from dominant paradigms in French educational research that continue to approach notions such as "failure" and "success" through macrostructural lenses, often reducing student voice to residual, anecdotal, or compensatory discourse (van Zanten, 2009; Merle, 2002).

The theoretical framework guiding this epistemological stance is rooted in Miranda Fricker's (2007) concept of *epistemic justice*, and more specifically her notions of *testimonial*

and *hermeneutical injustice*. These refer respectively to the unfair devaluation of a speaker's credibility due to identity prejudice, and to the structural gaps that render certain social experiences unintelligible within dominant interpretive frameworks. In the context of this study, students' accounts of academic failure are often delegitimised in public and institutional discourses, deemed too subjective or emotionally charged to qualify as knowledge. By contrast, this research asserts that such testimonies constitute forms of epistemic labour, and that failing to treat them as such perpetuates what Fricker identifies as epistemic paternalism.

Importantly, this study emerged from an *epistemic rupture* encountered during fieldwork: the recognition that many participants, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, upheld meritocratic ideals with conviction and nuance. Rather than dismiss these accounts as false consciousness or internalised domination, as French sociology often does (Lahire, 1995; Duru-Bellat, 2006), the research reframed its methodology in response. This rupture is not only philosophical, but methodological: it required a reconceptualisation of the field itself as a space of ethical listening, in which voice is not merely data, but an epistemic claim.

This shift has significant implications in the French intellectual landscape. While the sociology of education in France, strongly influenced by structuralism and post-structuralism, has offered powerful critiques of reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970), it has historically underplayed the interpretive agency of subordinated actors. Unlike Anglophone traditions that increasingly valorise subaltern knowledge, resistance, and discursive agency (Fraser, 2000; Scott, 1990), French sociology continues to privilege explanation over interpretation, and macro-structure over narrative complexity.

In attempting to respond to this limitation, the research takes inspiration from Bernard Lahire (2002; 2012), whose work on intra-individual plurality and contextualised dispositions offers a middle ground. Lahire insists that individuals are shaped by multiple, sometimes contradictory socialisations, and that sociological analysis must begin from empirical singularities without abandoning explanatory rigour. While critical of the "cult of singularity" in some qualitative traditions, Lahire nonetheless calls for a sociology capable of listening to actors without dissolving their accounts into ideological effects.

To address this tension, the present research adopts a systemic lens, drawing on Bronfenbrenner's *ecological systems theory* (1979). This model enables the positioning of student narratives within nested and interacting systems, from the classroom (microsystem) to

family and institutional interactions (mesosystem), policy and curriculum (exosystem), and cultural ideologies (macrosystem). Such an approach bridges the structural and the experiential, allowing for an understanding of student voices not as isolated anecdotes, but as embedded responses to systemic conditions.

Ultimately, the epistemological commitments of this research are threefold. First, it challenges dominant epistemologies that invalidate student voice through deficit framings. Second, it affirms the *situatedness* of knowledge, recognising that accounts of merit, success, and failure must be read in context. Third, it advances the notion of *epistemic rupture* as a methodological resource, inviting researchers to remain open to the possibility that the field may unsettle their assumptions, and that such unsettling is not a threat to rigour, but a condition of ethical inquiry.

3.3 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design, grounded in the understanding that meaning is constructed through social interaction and subjective experience. The central aim; to reframe dominant definitions of academic failure and success, required an approach that foregrounds students' lived realities and enables the co-construction of knowledge. In line with this, the study relies primarily on semi-structured interviews as its main method of data generation, allowing participants to articulate their perspectives in their own terms while offering space for reflexivity, nuance, and complexity.

Initially conceived as a broader qualitative inquiry involving at least fifteen participants, the research underwent a significant methodological shift following what can be described as an *epistemic rupture* during fieldwork. This moment of disruption, prompted by immersive engagement with one of France's largest child protection NGOs, exposed the dissonance between pre-formulated research expectations and the complex social realities encountered in the field. The decision to focus on three participants, each with distinct trajectories and positionalities, reflects an intentional pivot towards depth, nuance, and ethical attentiveness.

The research is further informed by narrative analysis, which serve as complementary modes of inquiry. Narrative methods preserve the coherence and specificity of individual life stories. This dual strategy ensures that the analysis remains grounded in participants' own

meaning-making while allowing for broader conceptual insights into the structural dynamics of schooling, failure, and resilience in the French educational system.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

This study employed a two-phase data collection process for each participant, consisting of (1) a structured demographic and socio-economic questionnaire inspired by the OECD's Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ESCS) Index, and (2) an in-depth semi-structured interview. This dual approach ensured that each student's narrative was contextualized within their broader socio-economic and cultural environment, aligning with the research's commitment to epistemic justice and complexity.

Phase 1: ESCS-Based Background Questionnaire

Prior to the interviews, participants completed a short demographic and socio-economic questionnaire. The design of this tool was adapted from the OECD PISA ESCS framework to ensure comparability with established indicators of educational inequality.

This questionnaire gathered key contextual data, including:

- Full name and age
- Gender identity
- Nationality
- Current school or educational institution

1. Do you have the following at home?

- A room of your own
- An internet connection
- A television

- A quiet place to study
- Books
- Works of art (e.g., paintings, sculptures, decorative objects)

2. Regarding your parents or legal guardians:

- Have they pursued higher education?
- What is their current occupation?
- What is their native language?
- How long have they lived in France?

This data enabled a fine-grained reading of each student's educational experience as embedded within intersecting structures of social class, migration status, and institutional accessibility.

Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews

Following the socio-economic background questionnaire, participants took part in semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Conducted in French and recorded with prior consent, these interviews were later fully transcribed for interpretive analysis. The semi-structured format enabled flexibility, allowing participants to guide the direction of the conversation and foreground their lived experience, while still addressing a common set of themes.

The interviews were structured around three interrelated thematic axes:

1. School Experience and Institutional Perception

This section served both as rapport-building and as a means to understand the participants' affective and relational positioning within their school environments.

Questions included:

- What do you enjoy most about school?
- What do you enjoy the least?
- If you could change one thing about school today, what would it be?
- Do you think school is a privilege, or something that helps you move forward?
- In your opinion, is school fair?

2. Definitions and Experiences of Success and Failure

This section constituted the conceptual core of the interview and of the broader study. Participants were invited to articulate their own definitions of success and failure, share personal experiences, and reflect on the causes they associate with each:

- How would you define academic success?
- Can you give an example of a moment when you felt you had succeeded at school?
- In your opinion, what causes academic success?
- How would you define academic failure?
- What do you think causes academic failure?
- Can you describe a moment when something didn't go as planned at school, a situation where you felt you had failed?
- Do you think failure can teach you something? Why or why not?

3. Aspirations and Institutional Fit

Finally, participants were asked to reflect on their aspirations for the future and the perceived role of school in helping, or hindering, their achievement:

- What are your goals or dreams for the future?
- Do you think school helps you reach them, or not?

3.4.2 Rationale for Sample Size

Although the original research design aimed for 12–15 participants, the final number was reduced to three following an epistemic rupture during early fieldwork. This shift was

not merely logistical but conceptual: it reflected a conscious turn toward *thick description* and depth over breadth. Each participant was treated not as a "case," but as a narrator of structurally situated experience, with the goal of co-constructing meaning rather than extrapolating generalizable trends.

3.5 Participant Profiles

Present in tabular or narrative format the key characteristics of:

- A: 18, private lycée, upper-middle class
- F: 19, CAP vocational student, first-generation immigrant, working-class
- T: 21, CAP vocational student, dyslexia, dyscalculia, adoptee, middle-class

This study focused on three participants, each selected to reflect a distinct social, cultural, and educational trajectory within the French education system. Their profiles were purposefully diverse to illuminate the multiple and situated meanings of academic failure and success.

A, aged 18, is currently enrolled in *terminale* (12th grade) at a private Catholic lycée under contract with the state, located in a wealthy arrondissement of Paris. She comes from an upper-middle-class background: her parents both hold higher education degrees, and one works in the financial sector. A. has her own room, access to books and internet, and lives in a culturally rich home environment with artworks and educational resources. She is academically high-achieving and attends a prestigious school that prepares students for the most competitive post-baccalaureate tracks. Her experience sheds light on how academic success is constructed and reproduced within elite schooling contexts.

F, aged 19, is a Kurdish asylum seeker from Turkey who arrived in France alone at the age of 16. He is currently in his first year of a CAP (Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle) vocational program in maintenance, after having completed the UP2O (Unité Pédagogique pour Élèves Allophones Arrivants) integration program. F. comes from a working-class background with no parental education and limited material resources. He lives in a studio provided through social support networks. His trajectory reflects the educational and

institutional challenges faced by unaccompanied minors navigating a new language, legal precarity, and vocational tracking.

T, aged 21, is in *terminale* (12th grade) in a vocational lycée, pursuing a *baccalauréat professionnel* in culinary arts. He was adopted from Vietnam at the age of two by a French couple, an editor and a graphic designer, now retired. T. was diagnosed with dyslexia and dysorthographia at an early age and previously attended a specialized private institution (Cours Morvan). He currently lives with his adoptive parents and has access to books, internet, and a calm environment for study. His experience is marked by transitions between public and private education, neurodiversity, and experiences of bullying, contributing to a nuanced understanding of educational marginalization within the vocational pathway.

Together, these three profiles offer rich, contrasting insights into the ways students from diverse social locations engage with, resist, and internalize the dominant narratives of failure and success in the French educational system.

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Analytic Approach: Situated Narrative Interpretation

Rather than following a formalised process of thematic analysis, this study employed a situated, iterative mode of narrative interpretation, consistent with the epistemological commitment to voice, context, and epistemic justice. Analysis was grounded in a close, recursive engagement with the material, transcripts were read and re-read, not to extract discrete codes or themes, but to attend to the rhetorical, affective, and ideological texture of participants' accounts.

Interpretation unfolded through the identification of discursive tensions, shifts, and positionings in how students spoke about success, failure, and merit. Definitions were examined not only for their explicit content but for the logics they implied, the affective labour they performed, and the social imaginaries they drew upon. This approach privileged semantic nuance, voice inflection, and narrative coherence, often situating participant accounts within broader cultural and institutional discourses (e.g., Republican meritocracy, educational determinism). Fieldnotes and reflexive memos were mobilised throughout to

trace the evolution of meaning-making, including the researcher's own interpretive shifts and ruptures.

Rather than identifying 'themes' per se, the analytic process sought to map ideological orientations, e.g., meritocratic belief, systemic critique, ambivalence, and to situate them relationally across participants' socioeconomic positions and lived trajectories. These orientations were then visualised through a conceptual graph (see Chapter 4.6), which plotted participants' definitions along intersecting axes of determinism/meritocracy and individual/systemic attribution. This visual synthesis was not reductive but illustrative, offering a way to render visible the situated plurality of student worldviews.

Ultimately, the analysis remained inductive, relational, and non-linear, faithful to the ontological premise that knowledge emerges through dialogue, and that student voice is not to be subsumed into typologies, but read as epistemic labour in context.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

3.7.1 Informed Consent and Safeguarding Protocols

This study fully adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) for research involving human participants, including those from potentially vulnerable backgrounds. Prior to data collection, each participant received a clear and accessible participant information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, the nature and format of participation (qualitative interviews), the voluntary nature of involvement, and the full scope of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point, without justification or consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before beginning the research.

All participants were over the age of 18 and thus legally competent to provide consent independently, in accordance with both UK and French ethical standards. The interviews did not involve sensitive medical or biometric data, nor did they include invasive or psychologically risky questioning. Instead, the study focused on participants' lived experiences and reflections on schooling, topics approached with care, respect, and reflexivity.

Participant recruitment was conducted through ethically approved channels: two participants were referred by professionals affiliated with a French child welfare NGO, and

one was contacted through personal acquaintance. Special attention was paid throughout to the safeguarding of participants, particularly in light of potentially sensitive biographical content. Interviews were conducted in safe, familiar environments chosen by the participants, and individuals were reminded throughout that they could pause, skip questions, or withdraw entirely at any time.

3.7.2 Anonymity, Confidentiality, and Data Protection

To ensure the protection of participant identity, all individuals cited in this dissertation are referred to using initials rather than real names. While initial discussions with participants included the possibility of retaining their first names in the final write-up, the decision was ultimately made to adopt anonymized initials in order to uphold best practices in ethical representation and data protection. This approach was especially important given the emotionally sensitive and potentially identifying nature of certain life narratives and institutional contexts.

In addition to anonymizing personal identifiers, all other potentially traceable details, such as school names, geographic locations, specific program titles, or names of institutional staff, have been carefully masked or omitted to prevent indirect identification. The anonymization process was guided by both ethical obligations and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as well as the University of Oxford's protocols on responsible data management.

All research data were collected, stored, and managed in strict accordance with the University of Oxford's information security standards. Audio recordings were encrypted and stored on password-protected devices. Transcripts, fieldnotes, and reflective memos were pseudonymized immediately after collection and securely backed up using encrypted cloud storage with access restricted solely to the principal researcher. Any physical documents or consent forms were stored in locked, access-controlled locations. All research materials will be retained securely for the duration specified by the University's research governance policy and will be destroyed thereafter in accordance with data protection regulations.

3.9 Limitations of the Study

3.9.1 Sample size and Qualitative nature

This study is based on an in-depth qualitative engagement with three participants. While some may critique the limited number of cases as a threat to generalizability, such a critique misunderstands the epistemological commitments of interpretivist research. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, the value of qualitative casework lies not in statistical representativeness but in the "force of example", the capacity of detailed, contextually embedded narratives to illuminate larger dynamics and challenge received assumptions. In this sense, the strength of this study lies precisely in its depth, not its breadth.

Indeed, as Geertz (1973) famously asserted, the task of social science is not to build universal laws but to produce *"thick descriptions"*, accounts that situate human meaning within specific webs of significance. The small sample size enabled an intense dialogical process, fostering relationships that brought forth rich, emotionally layered, and epistemically complex testimonies. This methodological orientation privileges analytical transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) over predictive generalizability: the goal is not to extrapolate outcomes across populations, but to offer situated insights that may resonate across contexts or challenge prevailing assumptions.

Moreover, as Small (2009) contends, qualitative research should not be reduced to anecdotalism or seen as a "cult of singularity." Rather, case-based reasoning allows researchers to engage with the "how" and "why" of social processes, often revealing dimensions of experience that large-scale studies systematically miss. In this study, the participants' divergent experiences of success and failure, and the epistemic labour they performed in narrating them, would likely have been flattened or rendered unintelligible within conventional survey instruments or quantification-driven frameworks.

3.9.2 Limitations

This research is grounded in a small-scale, qualitative inquiry with three participants. While this limited scope might be perceived as a methodological shortcoming, such a critique reflects a positivist reading of research rigour that this dissertation explicitly resists. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, the strength of case-based research lies in the *force of example*, not its representativeness, but its ability to unsettle assumptions, deepen conceptual understanding, and render visible that which more expansive methods may obscure.

Rather than seeking generalizability in the statistical sense, this study privileges analytical transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and thick description (Geertz, 1973), situating its claims within the moral and epistemological commitments of interpretive inquiry. It aims not to construct universals but to honour the singular as a site of epistemic rupture, a methodological stance increasingly defended within sociology (Small, 2009) and critical qualitative traditions (Khalid, 2023).

The intensity of the relational and reflexive engagement with each participant may also be viewed as a strength: it enabled the co-construction of complex narratives that could not have emerged in broader, more extractive designs. Nonetheless, this depth came with limits. First, the positionality of the researcher, white, privileged, institutionally sanctioned, introduced asymmetries of power that shaped what could be said, heard, and interpreted. Second, the emotional labour of navigating ethically charged narratives, often dealing with injustice and pain, required a form of reflexive vigilance not always made visible in standard methodological accounts.

This dissertation does not claim to be exhaustive. Its scope is partial, situated, and incomplete. But it embraces this incompleteness as an ethical method, one that foregrounds voice without seeking to speak for, that attends to silence without claiming to fill it.

Chapter 4:

Findings: Beyond Reproduction: Situated Merit and Epistemic Agency in Stratified Schooling

This chapter explores how students engaged in the French education system conceptualise the notions of success and failure, and how these understandings are shaped by their social trajectories, school experiences, and epistemic positioning.

As established in Chapter 2, French sociology of education has long analysed the role of schools in reproducing social hierarchies, most notably through the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1964; 1970), and more recently through Lahire (1995), van Zanten (2009), and Merle (2002). These structuralist paradigms have yielded powerful insights into the mechanisms of symbolic violence and class-based differentiation. Yet, in their explanatory force, they often risk effacing the interpretive agency of those subjected to these very processes. In particular, when students (often from disadvantaged backgrounds) express a belief in effort, resilience, or school meritocracy, this is frequently dismissed as either internalised domination or symbolic compensation. Such readings may unwittingly reproduce what Fricker (2007) terms *hermeneutical injustice*; the marginalisation of interpretive frameworks that fall outside dominant sociological vocabularies.

To attend to this tension, the chapter draws on Fricker's concepts of *testimonial* and *hermeneutical injustice* to interrogate how credibility and intelligibility are distributed, and resisted, within the school space. This chapter thus seeks not to adjudicate the "accuracy" of their beliefs, but to understand how their lived experience produces forms of reasoning that exceed the binaries of reproduction and resistance.

To deepen the analysis of participants' lived contexts, the chapter also mobilises Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which enables a reading of individual trajectories as embedded within nested social environments: from the immediacy of familial and school interactions (microsystem), to the interplay between these contexts (mesosystem), the structuring influence of institutional and policy frameworks (exosystem), and the broader ideological terrain of merit, competition, and national identity (macrosystem). This theoretical lens is used not as an external explanatory grid, but as a means to foreground the multiple scales of influence that shape how students navigate, absorb, or resist dominant school discourses (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The chapter unfolds in four movements. First, it situates each participant by drawing on socio-demographic and experiential data, in order to foreground the embeddedness of voice in structure. Second, it examines their school trajectories, with attention to how moments of inclusion, exclusion, recognition, or indifference shape their epistemic stance toward school. Third, the chapter analyses participants' definitions of success and failure; both their semantic content and their ideological stance. Lastly, it introduces the analytical concept of *situated merit*, which emerges from the empirical material as a mode of navigating injustice through moral labour, affective investment, and epistemic resilience.

Ultimately, the chapter argues that meritocratic discourse among students in stratified educational contexts cannot be reduced to false consciousness. Instead, it must be read as a situated response to systemic constraint: a form of epistemic labour that seeks dignity, recognition, and meaning within institutions that often deny them all three. In taking these discourses seriously, this chapter calls for a revaluation of student voice, not as a vehicle of data, but as a source of theory.

4.1 Contextualizing the Participants: Structural Position and Social Trajectories

F. - Precarious Migrant Trajectory and Working-Class Position

F. is a 19-year-old student currently enrolled in a CAP (Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle) in technical building maintenance at a vocational school in the Paris region. Originally from a Kurdish village in southeastern Turkey, F. identifies as Kurdish rather than Turkish, a political and cultural distinction he articulates clearly and consistently. Kurdish was his first language; he learned Turkish later through schooling, and French only upon arriving in France. His parents remain in Turkey and have never received formal schooling. F. left his home country alone at the age of sixteen, fleeing military conscription, cultural repression, and the absence of long-term prospects for Kurdish youth.

F.'s experience can be read through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which makes visible the layered structures shaping his educational journey. At the microsystem level, F. navigates his immediate environment: the vocational school, his studio apartment, and interactions with peers and teachers. These direct settings are marked by instability but also by moments of relational support and resilience. The mesosystem; the interconnection between these settings, is mediated primarily by the NGO that supported his

legal regularisation, educational access, and housing. The role of this organisation is crucial in linking disconnected domains (legal, social, educational) that would otherwise remain fragmented.

At the exosystem level, F.'s life is deeply shaped by policies concerning immigration, asylum, and youth protection. These structures operate beyond his immediate environment yet have a determining effect on his possibilities: eligibility for documents, healthcare, and education are contingent on institutional decisions and administrative logics. Finally, the macrosystem; the broader cultural and ideological context, manifests in the symbolic exclusion he faces as a racialised, working-class, and undocumented migrant youth. Republican universalism, linguistic assimilation, and meritocratic narratives serve as normative backdrops that define the boundaries of recognition and success in the French system.

Despite these constraints, F. demonstrates a high level of reflexivity, a pronounced political consciousness, and an ambition to pursue further education and French citizenship. His position can be described as precarious working class (*classes populaires précaires*), shaped not only by economic insecurity but also by migratory rupture, legal instability, and lack of institutional inheritance. His trajectory exemplifies the intersection of material deprivation and symbolic exclusion, particularly in relation to linguistic capital, legal status, and institutional recognition, while also revealing the multi-layered systems that condition, constrain, and occasionally enable the possibility of educational success.

T. - Cultural Capital Without Institutional Translation

T. is a 21-year-old student enrolled in a Bac Pro Cuisine at a private vocational lycée. Born in Vietnam and adopted at the age of two by French parents with stable professional background, his mother a retired teacher and his father a former cook, T. was raised in a home environment rich in cultural resources. He speaks only French and identifies entirely with French cultural norms and language. The presence of books, artworks, and a strong familial support structure points to high levels of embodied and objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979).

Despite these resources, T.'s academic trajectory has been marked by repeated episodes of institutional misrecognition and fatigue. Diagnosed from childhood with dyslexia, dysorthographia, and dyscalculia, he repeated two school years and encountered bullying

across several educational contexts. The microsystem reveals this tension between care and stability at home and a school environment characterised by stigma and exclusion. The mesosystem, linking these two spheres, exposes a structural dissonance: while his parents actively sought appropriate accommodations - including enrolling him in a specialised school - his needs were often met with inconsistent or inadequate institutional responses.

The exosystem plays a significant role in shaping his path, from the broader organisation of vocational education to the uneven implementation of neurodiversity support policies. T.'s position within a macrosystem dominated by meritocratic and ableist norms further compounds the disconnect between his capacities and how they are institutionally read. Unlike students whose home cultures align with institutional expectations, T. experiences a form of symbolic misrecognition that undermines the potential of his cultural capital to translate into school success.

Socially, T. occupies a lower-middle-class position within the *petite bourgeoisie culturelle*; possessing strong cultural foundations but lacking the institutional alignment necessary to convert them into academic recognition.

A. - Upper-Class Privilege with Symbolic Discomfort

A. is an 18-year-old student in Terminale, enrolled in a private secondary school under contract with the state. She lives in a quiet and materially secure environment with her mother; her father works in the financial sector. Her daily life is marked by comfort and stability; she has her own bedroom, reliable internet access, and a wealth of cultural resources including books and private tutoring. French is her first and only language, and she identifies fully with French cultural and linguistic norms.

A.'s microsystem is saturated with resources and educational support, creating optimal conditions for academic success. Her mesosystem; notably the interface between home and school, functions seamlessly, with parental engagement reinforcing the institutional logic of elite schooling. Her trajectory unfolds within a macrosystem that legitimises and reproduces her position through dominant discourses of merit, competition, and republican neutrality.

Yet A.'s testimony complicates this structural privilege. She articulates a symbolic discomfort with the institution, voicing critique of excessive assessment and administrative pressures. This suggests a subjective dissonance between her internalised values and the

performative demands of the school system. Unlike her peers from more precarious backgrounds, her critique emerges not from marginalisation but from within an embedded position in dominant structures, a form of epistemic dissonance experienced in relative security.

A.'s position aligns with the *grande bourgeoisie intellectuelle et économique*, characterised by high volumes of economic and cultural capital and privileged access to elite educational pathways. However, her experience illustrates that institutional success does not guarantee existential or epistemic alignment. Her narrative draws attention to the ways in which educational systems not only stratify but also shape the affective and symbolic experiences of those they privilege.

4.2 Participants' Schooling Experiences: Between Speech, Silencing, and Misrecognition

In this section, I examine how participants articulate their schooling experiences and how their voices are differentially received and (mis)understood within institutional contexts. Drawing on Fricker's (2007) distinction between testimonial injustice,when a speaker's credibility is unfairly deflated,and hermeneutical injustice,when a speaker lacks the conceptual resources to make sense of or communicate their experience,I interpret these encounters as part of a broader landscape of epistemic asymmetries.

F., a 19-year-old student of Kurdish origin, presents a complex trajectory shaped by political marginalisation in Turkey, migration, legal precarity, and partial recognition in France. Recounting this period, he explains:

"At first, they didn't believe me when I said I was sixteen. I had to go through the court. My parents sent documents, and finally, the judge accepted. That's when I was given papers."

This account is delivered with clarity rather than resentment, revealing an acute awareness of being doubted by default.

F.'s narrative is marked by a comparative lens through which his schooling experience in France is evaluated. In Turkey, he explains, speaking Kurdish was strictly forbidden and

punished: *"If you spoke Kurdish at school, you were beaten. Even the teachers hit you. You were treated like an animal."* By contrast, he views French schools as spaces where speech is at least formally possible: *"Here, at least, you can talk. There's the right to speak. It's not like in Turkey."* This recognition of expressive freedom does not amount to a claim of full inclusion, but rather signals a relative sense of epistemic safety, especially in light of prior experiences of linguistic repression.

While F. does acknowledge moments of cultural distance and disinterest from teachers, these are not presented as defining features of his schooling in France. On the contrary, he emphasizes the role of supportive actors, social workers, educators, and NGO staff, in facilitating his access to language, education, and legal rights. His tone throughout is neither accusatory nor idealising, but cautiously appreciative of opportunities unavailable to him in Turkey. Yet subtle traces of epistemic asymmetry persist. When discussing classroom discussions, particularly around history and politics, he notes:

"In class, we talk about history, but not the real history. If I try to talk about what's happening to Kurds, it doesn't interest them. They change the subject."

Though he does not frame this as an outright exclusion, his repetition of "they're not interested" across multiple examples suggests a recurrent pattern of his knowledge being redirected or rendered peripheral. This signals a potential form of testimonial injustice, where the speaker's credibility is not openly denied but subtly diminished through indifference. F.'s narrative is also marked by resilience and political subjectivity. He consistently affirms his Kurdish identity, articulates critiques of authoritarianism, and expresses ambitions for further study and French citizenship. His experience of schooling in France, while shaped by initial hardship and ongoing marginalisation, is described as a space where the right to speak and be supported, though partial, is nonetheless real. In this sense, F. does not merely endure exclusion; he navigates it with agency, drawing on his comparative perspective to make sense of a system that, while imperfect, allows him to begin reconstituting himself as both a learner and a rights-bearing subject.

T., a 21-year-old student currently enrolled in a Bac Pro Cuisine program, recounts a schooling experience shaped by an early and long-standing diagnosis of dyslexia,

dysorthographia, and dyscalculia, alongside a persistent sense of being misunderstood. Diagnosed from as early as the crèche, after initial suspicions that he was deaf or mute, he began working with a speech therapist, a specialised educator, and a psychologist by the age of six. His difficulties were formally recognised, and he was issued an official certificate, leading to his placement in a specialised institution, Cours Morvan, designed for students with language disorders or behavioural challenges.

While Cours Morvan offered adapted teaching, T. explains that institutional recognition did not guarantee true pedagogical understanding.

"They knew I had problems. I had the certificate, the paperwork. But they didn't really understand. They saw the spelling mistakes, not the effort it cost me to read and write. They didn't see that I was exhausted just from trying to follow." He speaks of a kind of cognitive invisibility, where his intellectual effort was rarely acknowledged even when his diagnosis was on record.

After leaving Cours Morvan and entering mainstream schooling, the differences between settings became immediately apparent. Some subjects, like French, felt harder than before, and the variability of teacher attitudes played a decisive role in his experience.

"Even orally, I make mistakes… and sometimes they don't understand, they ask me to repeat… as if I were just distracted, not dyslexic. Some teachers are lovely and very understanding… but others don't care at all."

Each school year was different; while a few teachers adapted their approach, others kept the same expectations as for any other student, seemingly forgetting about his needs. For T., this "forgetting" was not harmless, it felt like another form of exclusion.

"They push for studies, but outside the classroom, they do nothing… it's as if the only thing that counts is what happens in the classroom." This lack of consistent accommodation led to cumulative exhaustion: *"It was tiring, exhausting… you have to keep up with the pace, but I didn't have the same pace as them."*

The mismatch between his learning rhythm and the school's institutional tempo was reinforced by his two repeated years, once in primary school and again before vocational lycée. Both were justified as a way for him to "catch up," but, as he explains:

"They said it was to catch up… but I wasn't behind, I just learned differently."

He resists the deficit framing implicit in these decisions, seeing them instead as a failure of the system to recognise alternative ways of learning.

His time in mainstream settings also brought exposure to discrimination and bullying, particularly for students with learning difficulties. He describes the stigma surrounding ULIS classes, which he sees as exacerbating segregation rather than supporting integration.

"Don't put people into boxes… People who have learning difficulties should be with others, not separated." For T., being "recognised" as different without being meaningfully supported was another form of symbolic exclusion, signalling that his difference could be acknowledged on paper while remaining invisible in practice.

Periods of emotional withdrawal, especially during adolescence, became a coping mechanism. *"I stopped talking at school. I only answered when I had to. I didn't want to be there, but I couldn't explain why. It was just exhausting, like no one got it."*

His silence was not disengagement but a response to the saturation of constantly having to explain himself, in an environment that demanded performance without accommodating the realities of his learning needs.

A., a student at a private lycée under contract with the state, speaks from a position of institutional privilege, but expresses discomfort with the framing of student voice and evaluation. When asked about her relationship to school, she responds:

"I don't hate learning, I actually like it when there's no pressure. But school isn't about that. It's about tasks, stress, grades. And when I say that, teachers think I'm just complaining."

A. articulates a disjunction between what she values; intellectual curiosity, and what school rewards; performance. Her observation that her remarks are dismissed as "complaining" points to a recurring affective misreading of critique as disaffection. She later adds:

> *"Sometimes I feel like school wants us to perform, not think. But if you say that out loud, they say you're being negative."*

This pattern recurs in her narrative: insight becomes misinterpreted as resistance or disengagement.

4.3 Situated Definitions of Success and Failure

In this section, I examine how participants construct their own meanings of school success and failure. Rather than relying solely on institutional categories such as diplomas or grades, I foreground how young people articulate success as an affective, embodied, and socially situated experience. Their definitions reveal not only personal aspirations but also broader ideological affiliations,whether meritocratic, critical, or psychosocial. These formulations reflect participants' efforts to position themselves as epistemic agents capable of naming what matters, even within systems that often constrain their voices.

T.: Success as Affirmation, Failure as Somatic Distress

For T., a middle-class student with dyslexia, dysorthographia and dyscalculia, success is inseparable from a sense of existential validation. He defines success as:

"*when you're proud to go to school, when you know you've learned things*," adding that it is only retrospectively that one can judge whether their time in school was wasted. His strongest example is affective: "*I was proud of myself when I got the brevet. I thought I had failed it, but I got a mention. That was a moment of success for me.*"

Success, here, is not defined by grades alone but by the disconfirmation of expected failure.

T.'s understanding of failure is deeply embodied. It is not merely the absence of results, but a state of chronic psychosomatic distress:

"*It's when you don't want to go to school anymore and you're always afraid, with a knot in your stomach.*"

School failure becomes a condition of being unwell:

"*if at night you can't sleep because you're thinking, 'Tomorrow I have to go to school, and I don't want to,' for me, that's school failure*."

This formulation situates failure not as an individual deficit but as a relational breakdown between student and institution. It also reflects a hermeneutical reframing of failure: one that foregrounds emotion, fatigue, and fear as legitimate epistemic signs of misalignment.

A.: Success as Cultural Capital, Failure as Demoralization

A., a student in a well-resourced private *lycée*, initially defines success conventionally: *"Well, it's getting good grades."* However, in a follow-up written reflection, she adds: *"For me, school success is, after good grades, what you've gained from all those years of school: if you know how to express yourself, write, argue, and have general knowledge, etc."*

This shift illustrates a layered definition of success: while grades remain central, symbolic capital such as verbal fluency, argumentation, and cultural literacy are equally valorised.

Her conception of failure is symmetrical: *"the opposite, getting bad grades."* Yet, she nuances this with a sense of futility and internalization: *"Even if you work a lot... you'll never excel... and also, even for your ego, it's kind of demoralizing."* A. experiences a form of symbolic violence in which apparent meritocracy gives way to subtle determinism. Despite her privileged schooling environment, she articulates a quiet disenchantment with the promise of equal opportunity, a stance that aligns with sociological critiques of reproduction (Bourdieu, 1970), even if not explicitly stated as such.

F.: Success as Responsibility, Failure as Individual Choice

F., a 19-year-old Kurdish refugee student, defines school success as both formal certification and linguistic integration:

"My goal now is to get at least the bac pro diploma. Because the CAP diploma is a good level, but it's not a very high level. The French language too [is part of success]." His definition reflects both instrumental and symbolic aspirations: to gain recognized qualifications and to master the national language.

F. does not frame failure as systemic exclusion but as a lapse in personal responsibility: *"It's me. If, for example, I don't wake up at 6 a.m. tomorrow and I don't go to school, I won't succeed. That's it, I'm the one in control."*

For him, failure is a choice, not a condition: *"If we work, we get the fruits of our work. If we don't work, it doesn't work."*

This articulation aligns with an individualized, internalized version of meritocracy, one likely shaped by his trajectory of precarity and the strong contrast with his past in Turkey. His belief in education as a tool of emancipation (*"school, it's freedom"*) reflects both a hopeful projection and a structural absence: systemic barriers are underemphasized.

4.4 Visual Synthesis: Table of Profiles, Injustices, and Ideological Framings

In order to synthesise the data presented in the previous sections and clarify the comparative logic of this chapter, the following table provides a condensed analytical overview of the three participants. For each student, it outlines: their socio-educational profile; the forms of epistemic injustice they encountered (following Fricker's typology); their situated definitions of school success and failure; and a brief interpretive positioning of their definition within broader ideological frameworks, namely meritocratic, deterministic, or psychosocial paradigms.

This table serves both a descriptive and epistemological function. First, it clarifies the complex interplay between participants' structural positions and their normative attachments to school. Second, it supports the development of a key conceptual contribution of this dissertation: the notion of *situated merit*. By mapping how each student rearticulates the meaning of success,sometimes in line with dominant ideologies, sometimes against them,the table makes visible the coexistence of hope, critique, internalisation, and resistance within

student discourse. This does not aim to categorise students reductively, but rather to foreground their discursive agency in navigating, reproducing, or subverting institutional expectations. The table should be read as a heuristic device,one that clarifies patterns without erasing nuance.

P	**SES profil**	**Form(s) of injustice experienced**	**Definition of success**	**Definition of Failure**	**Ideological interpretation**
T	Lower-middle class; adopted; diagnosed with learning disabilities; stable housing; limited cultural capital. **School:** Public school, specialized class ULIS for disabled students	Cognitive invisibility, hermeneutical gap, affective silencing	"Success is when you're proud to go to school, when you know you've learned things. And when you leave school, if you ask yourself, 'Did I waste my life? Did I waste my time studying or not?'" "I was proud of myself when I got the brevet. I thought I had failed it, but I got a mention. That was a moment of success for me."	"It's when you don't want to go to school anymore and you're always afraid, with a knot in your stomach." "For me, if you don't want to go to school, that's school failure, because learning things is cool. I think everyone loves learning new stuff. But if at night you can't sleep because you're thinking, 'Tomorrow I have to go to school, and I don't want to,' for me, that's school failure."	Psychosocial resistance to academic determinism; redefines success through well-being over normative achievement.
A	Upper-class - Bourgeois class. **School:** Private catholic school	Misrecognised critique, discredited affect, hermeneutical dissonance	"Well, it's getting good grades." "For me, school success is, after good grades, what you've gained from all those years of school: if you know how to express yourself, write, argue, and have general knowledge, etc."	"Well, the opposite, getting bad grades." "[but at school] Even if you work a lot... you'll never excel... and also, even for your ego, it's kind of demoralizing."	Ambivalent relation to meritocratic ideology; acknowledges academic privilege while critiquing performative pressures.

F	Working class; Kurdish refugee; arrived alone at 16; experienced precarity; supported by NGO. **School:** Professional education. CAP (Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle) in technical building maintenance at a vocational school in the Paris region	Testimonial injustice (Credibility deficit), cultural unreadability, silencing through redirection	"My goal now is to get at least the bac pro diploma. Because the CAP diploma is a good level, but it's not a very high level." "The French language too" [is part of success]."	"It's me. If, for example, I don't wake up at 6 a.m. tomorrow and I don't go to school, I won't succeed. That's it, I'm the one in control." "If we work, we get the fruits of our work. If we don't work, it doesn't work."	Instrumental engagement with meritocratic structures; navigates structural marginalisation through strategic adaptation.

4.5 Ideological Tensions and Situated Merit: Problematizing Interpretations of Success

What emerges from both the sociological literature and the empirical findings of this research is a paradox that is particularly revealing in the French context: while critiques of meritocracy as an ideological veil for structural reproduction are most forcefully articulated by sociologists, educators, and upper- or middle-class intellectuals (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964; Lahire, 1995; Merle, 2002), it is often among working-class and racialized students that belief in the meritocratic promise of school is most strongly expressed. Lahire (1995) famously described this belief as a *croyance nécessaire*, a symbolic strategy to preserve dignity in the face of institutional humiliation. Yet this reading, for all its analytical depth, raises a difficult question: does the very sociology that critiques inequality risk committing an epistemic injustice of its own, namely, by invalidating students' situated meaning-making as false consciousness?

This tension became sharply visible in the course of this research. Entering the field from a position of educational privilege and steeped in a structuralist, critical tradition, I anticipated that students would express disillusionment with a system widely recognized as reproducing class-based inequalities. Instead, I encountered participants, particularly those most precariously positioned, who held firmly to discourses of effort, resilience, and individual responsibility. This epistemic dissonance, which I would describe as a moment of *fieldwork rupture*, compelled me to reexamine not only my assumptions, but the interpretive frameworks dominant in French sociology of education.

This experience prompts a critical question that structures this chapter:

To what extent do dominant discourses within educational research - particularly those that frame meritocratic beliefs as naïve or strategic - risk undermining the epistemic agency of the very students they aim to defend?

And how might we, as researchers, learn to hear these discourses not as ideological errors but as contextually grounded expressions of agency?

In response, this chapter proposes an alternative conceptualisation: *merit as situated.* Drawing on Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice, especially the notion of *hermeneutical injustice*, which arises when marginalised groups are denied access to collective interpretive resources, I argue that meritocratic belief among disadvantaged students must be understood as a *situated epistemic practice*. These discourses are not necessarily indicative of internalised oppression, but may reflect embodied strategies for making meaning, asserting worth, and preserving moral legitimacy within an institutional context that routinely devalues them.

F.'s narrative, for instance, cannot be understood merely as a failure to perceive structural constraints. Rather, it reveals a form of resilient subjecthood. His insistence on framing his success in terms of effort and responsibility is not a denial of systemic injustice; it is a response to it, one that seeks to assert value within a discursive space that routinely marginalizes voices like his.

What is essential to understand here is that situated merit does not negate the reality of individual achievement; on the contrary, it offers a framework for acknowledging it. F.'s

testimony, from leaving his home country alone at the age of sixteen, navigating legal precarity, and living in tents, to securing access to education and now pursuing vocational training in construction, is not simply a narrative of adaptation. It is a demonstration of merit *as praxis*, grounded in perseverance, moral labour, and the pursuit of legitimacy under constraint.

To interpret such accounts solely through a critical-deterministic lens would be to reproduce what Fricker (2007) terms *epistemic paternalism*: the failure to take the knowledge and self-understandings of structurally disempowered individuals seriously. Situated merit, then, offers a necessary corrective. It affirms that merit, when articulated from below, is not merely an ideological residue of dominant discourse, but can constitute a valid and contextually grounded pathway to self-affirmation and social mobility.

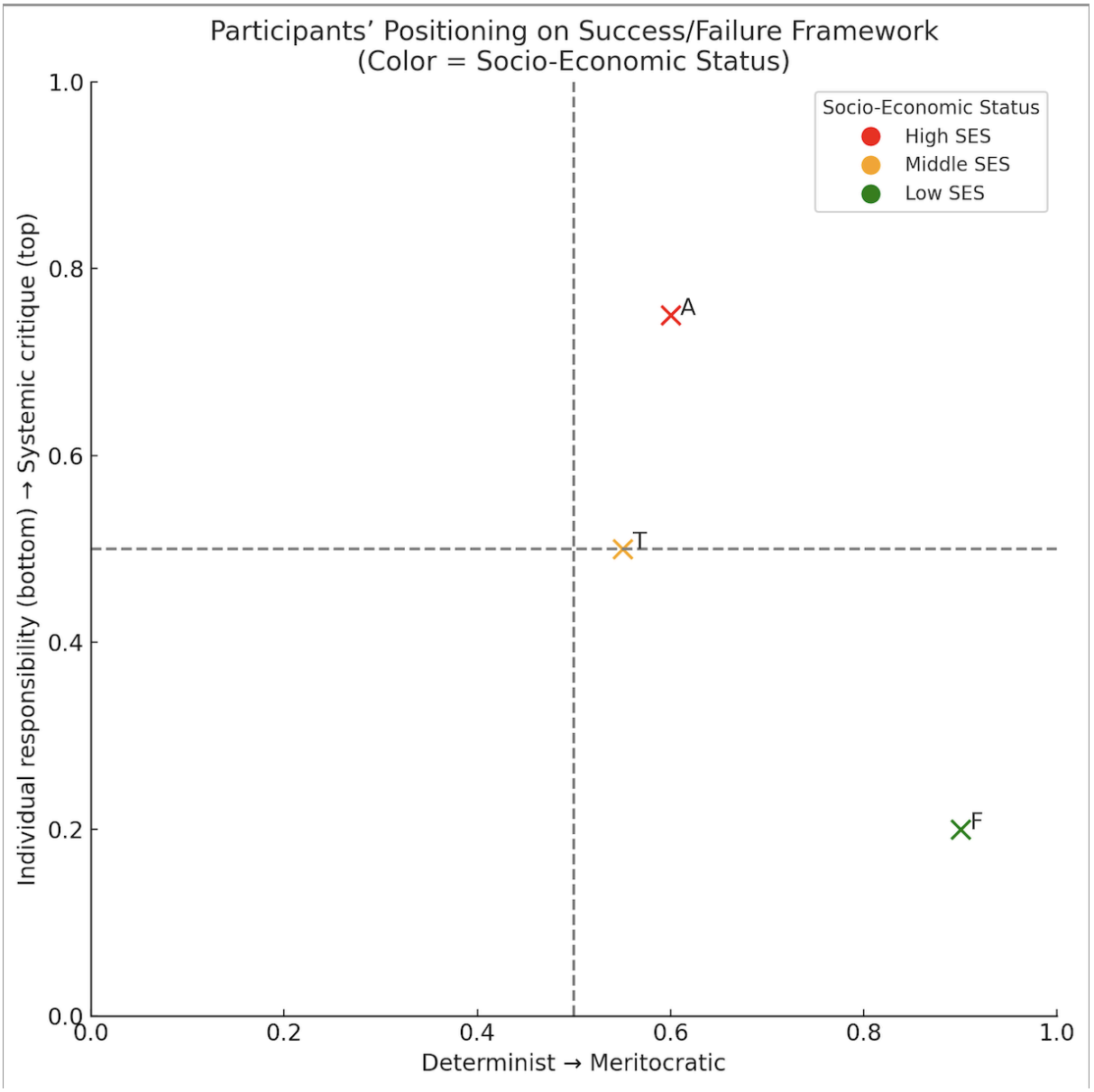
This chapter therefore suggests that *situated merit* is not an oxymoron, but a necessary category of analysis. It calls for a sociology capable of holding space for ambivalence: one that does not romanticise meritocratic belief, but also does not reduce it to illusion. Crucially, it requires a methodological and ethical shift, toward an *epistemic humility* that foregrounds student voices not as empirical data to confirm our theoretical commitments, but as legitimate, embodied epistemologies in their own right (Khalid, 2023; Fraser, 2000; Scott, 1990).

It is important to distinguish this framing of *situated merit* from adjacent but analytically distinct concepts such as *resigned meritocracy* or *symbolic compensation*. Whereas *resigned meritocracy* implies a passive internalization of institutional norms as a coping mechanism (Lahire, 1995), and *symbolic compensation* denotes the affective trade-off of hope for structural blindness (Dubet, 2002), the notion of *situated merit* proposed here foregrounds agency, reflexivity, and affective investment. It acknowledges that belief in merit can coexist with a critical awareness of structural constraints, and that such belief does not necessarily reflect ideological naïveté. Rather, it can emerge as a contextually embedded moral and epistemic stance; one that allows students to navigate contradictory discourses, reclaim dignity, and assert value within an unequal institutional order.

To illustrate these dynamics, the following graph maps participants' positioning along two axes: one ranging from *determinism* to *meritocratic belief*, and another from *individual attribution* to *systemic critique*. Their locations are inferred from both their definitions of

success and failure and their broader narratives. The graph is not meant to fix students into ideological camps, but to visualise the complexity, hybridity, and ambivalence of their discourses. The colour-coding by socio-economic status offers a further interpretive layer, revealing how epistemic positioning is both shaped by, and exceeds, social location.

Ultimately, the findings presented here argue for a revalorisation of student voice as epistemic labour; labour that resists classification, that troubles neat distinctions between resistance and adaptation, and that demands to be read on its own terms. The concept of situated merit is proposed not as an endorsement of individualism, but as an invitation to attend seriously to the moral, emotional, and cognitive efforts that students invest in making sense of their place in an unequal system. It reframes merit not as the opposite of constraint, but as a way of enduring it with meaning.



Discussion

The three participants in this study articulated distinct and nuanced understandings of school failure and success, shaped by their social trajectories, emotional experiences, and positionality within the educational system.

Well-being at School is Success

For T., school success is intimately linked to psychological and emotional factors. He defines failure not in terms of grades or institutional benchmarks but as a lack of desire to attend school; a state he associates with fear, anxiety, and alienation. Conversely, success is characterised by the desire to go to school and feel at ease within it. This perspective aligns with research in educational psychology that identifies early signs of school disengagement - including absenteeism, emotional withdrawal, and lack of motivation - as key predictors of dropout (Janosz et al., 2000; Archambault et al., 2009).

T.'s reflections are deeply informed by his lived experience as a neurodivergent student who was diagnosed with dyslexia and dysorthographia in childhood. He repeatedly described how the French *dispositif ULIS* (Unité Localisée pour l'Inclusion Scolaire), designed to support students with learning disabilities, reinforced stigma and exclusion by creating a binary distinction between "normal" and "non-normal" students. When asked whether he would retain the dispositif if he had decision-making power, he emphatically rejected it, stating that the French education system "loves labelling."

This critique echoes Lahire's (1995; 2021) analysis of how institutional *dispositifs* operate as instruments of classification that reduce the complexity of individual trajectories into administratively legible categories. Rather than recognising the *pluralité des dispositions* - the diverse, sometimes contradictory, social and psychological tendencies that coexist within individuals - schools tend to impose homogenising frameworks that pathologise deviation from normative expectations. In this context, dispositifs such as ULIS may appear inclusive but often function as mechanisms of symbolic violence, reinforcing the very marginalisation they aim to remedy. T.'s narrative illustrates this paradox: while ostensibly designed to support neurodivergent students, the dispositif became a site of stigmatisation, marking him as fundamentally other and limiting his epistemic credibility within the school space.

School Success is the Capacity to Express One's Agency

For A., school success initially appears to conform to dominant definitions: high performance, good grades, and academic achievement. However, as the interview unfolded, she reconsidered this stance. Success, she later claimed, should mean being able to articulate one's thoughts, possess general knowledge, and cultivate a desire for learning; dimensions of education not captured by institutional metrics. Although she has access to elite educational

spaces, A. frequently expressed disillusionment with the pressure to perform and the absence of joy in learning.

Her reflections point to a broader tension within meritocratic schooling systems, which valorise quantifiable success while neglecting affective and intellectual engagement (Dubet, 1994; Biesta, 2009). Like T., A. redefines success as a form of agency: the ability to find meaning in one's education rather than simply conforming to its demands. Both participants converge in asserting that school failure occurs when the system erodes students' intrinsic desire to learn, and success arises when school fosters joy, curiosity, and expressive freedom.

School Success is the Effort You Put In

For F., school success is achieved through personal effort, discipline, and perseverance. This meritocratic understanding reflects his own life trajectory: arriving alone in France at sixteen, without legal documentation, linguistic resources, or institutional capital, F. has had to overcome extraordinary hardships to access education. His definition of success as individual effort is thus deeply situated in his lived reality.

Yet F.'s narrative also contains affective dimensions that complicate a purely meritocratic reading. During the interview, he showed a tattoo on his arm depicting a child playing beneath a tree on one side, and a child hanging from it on the other. When asked which side represented his experience of school in Turkey, he pointed to the hanging child. When asked about school in France, he pointed to the tree. He explained that for him, peace came from becoming a stable presence capable of holding both joy and suffering. Despite his firm belief in effort, he associated school success with stability and emotional safety; qualities he lacked in his country of origin.



(Image shared by F; this is not the original tattoo, but a fictional reproduction provided with their consent for illustrative purposes.)

4.6 Conclusion

Across all three narratives, there is a powerful interweaving of emotional and institutional experiences in shaping how students define and experience success and failure. Research in educational psychology has long underscored the role of self-esteem, self-concept, and affective engagement in learning (Marsh, 1990; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Yet these dimensions remain largely absent from how success and failure are measured within the French education system, which continues to privilege academic performance as the sole indicator of worth.

This dissertation contends that psychological and emotional well-being should be recognised as integral components of educational assessment and intervention. Current practices that rely exclusively on performance metrics risk erasing the complex emotional landscapes within which learning occurs. High-achieving students may experience significant psychological distress, while low-achieving students may feel secure, motivated, and connected to their school environment. To treat these students as equivalent on the basis of test scores alone is not only reductive, but pedagogically negligent. Educational success must be understood as multidimensional, encompassing both academic outcomes and the subjective well-being of learners.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of recognising situated merit as a legitimate and contextually grounded form of educational agency. This does not entail a denial of structural determinism or of the deeply unequal terrain on which students pursue education. Rather, it offers a corrective to sociological accounts that dismiss meritocratic discourse as mere illusion, internalised domination, or compensatory strategy. While these critiques have exposed the ideological functions of merit in masking inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; van Zanten, 2009), they risk foreclosing an appreciation of the differentiated, embodied labour - cognitive, emotional, and social - that students invest in navigating educational pathways. Situated merit, as observed in this study, does not negate structural reproduction but coexists with it, offering insight into how students forge meaning, dignity, and aspiration within conditions not of their choosing. A nuanced engagement with merit requires attending to the specificity of these efforts without reducing them to false consciousness.

Ultimately, this study calls for a shift in how we conceptualise and evaluate school failure and success: from fixed institutional outcomes to lived, situated, and emotionally

inflected experiences. Only by doing so can educational policy and practice become more just, responsive, and attuned to the realities of those it seeks to serve.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter synthesises the empirical findings with the historical, philosophical, and policy contexts outlined in Chapter 2. It demonstrates how the concept of *situated merit*, emergent from participant narratives, both affirms and disrupts the macro-level logics of French educational governance; particularly those embedded in Parcoursup's admissions algorithm, the OECD's PISA framework, and the enduring republican ideal of *égalité des chances*.

5.1 Situated Merit and the Limits of Universalism

Participants' definitions of success reveal a recurring pattern: merit is understood relationally and contextually, rather than as a fixed or universally measurable quality. For A., success was inseparable from mastering the codes of her elite private lycée; for F., it lay in overcoming legal and linguistic barriers to secure vocational training; for T., it was rooted in feeling safe and calm in class. These accounts crystallise the notion of *situated merit*, in which achievement is defined within the constraints and affordances of a specific socio-institutional context.

This reading complicates the universalist framing of Parcoursup's "transparent" admissions logic (see 2.3.1). While Parcoursup purports to evaluate all candidates on equal terms, participants' accounts reveal that the recognition of merit remains contingent on institutional habitus and resource availability. A's trajectory illustrates how certain forms of merit (high grades from a prestigious lycée) align seamlessly with Parcoursup's implicit hierarchies, while F's vocational qualifications, though hard-earned, would likely carry less weight in the same system.

As van Zanten (2018) has shown, Parcoursup operationalises existing inequalities by embedding institutional prestige into its selection criteria. *Situated merit* exposes the epistemic gap between this policy rhetoric of neutrality and the lived conditions under which merit is constructed and recognised.

5.2 Meritocracy, Determinism, and Epistemic Agency

The tension between meritocratic belief and structural determinism, identified in Chapter 2 as the *paradoxe méritocratique* (Dubet, 2004), was strongly present in the interviews. F's framing of failure as a personal challenge to overcome echoes Lahire's (1995) notion of meritocracy as a "necessary belief" that sustains hope under conditions of disadvantage. Yet, unlike Lahire's respondents, F's account integrates structural awareness: he recognises that administrative precarity, housing instability, and late arrival in the French system shape his opportunities. This hybrid stance complicates deterministic readings in French sociology, suggesting a form of epistemic agency that is neither naïve nor purely oppositional.

T's narrative also disrupts binary framings. While acknowledging systemic biases against vocational students and those with learning differences, he resists a victim identity, positioning small, relational experiences - such as a teacher's patience - as markers of success. This focus on affective safety stands in stark contrast to macro-level discourses privileging measurable outputs such as PISA rankings (see 2.3.3). The divergence illustrates how global performance metrics risk erasing precisely the relational dimensions of achievement that students value most.

These findings align with Plaisance's (1999) critique of the republican imaginary, which constructs the child as a "future citizen" to be moulded, rather than as a present epistemic agent. By foregrounding participants' interpretive labour, the study challenges this temporal deferral and affirms the legitimacy of students' own evaluative frameworks.

It is from this empirical ground that the present study introduces the concept of situated merit. Situated merit refers to *a form of educational agency in which the value, meaning, and recognition of achievement are interpreted and enacted within the specific social, cultural, material, and institutional conditions of a student's life*. Unlike abstract or universalist notions of merit, which presume context-free standards of effort and ability, situated merit foregrounds the relational, embodied, and locally contingent factors that shape both how merit is pursued and how it is recognised. It acknowledges structural inequalities while affirming students' own rationalities, strategies, and moral frameworks as legitimate forms of knowledge.

Applied to the notions of success and failure, situated merit provides a lens through which researchers, policymakers, and evaluators can attend not only to students' feelings and interpretations of these categories, but also to their positioning as social actors in a stratified

context. In doing so, it bridges the gap between structural critique and the lived, agentive perspectives of those most affected by educational classifications.

5.3 Systemic Patterns and Policy Implications

A's case underscores how elite schooling environments not only provide academic preparation but also confer symbolic legitimacy that aligns with national and international accountability regimes. Her experience confirms Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970) argument that educational success is inseparable from the cultural capital embedded in dominant-class institutions. This alignment means her "merit" is both legible and rewarded within Parcoursup and in global benchmarking exercises such as PISA, reinforcing the structural advantages of her social position.

By contrast, F's navigation of vocational pathways illustrates the *territorialisation of failure* (Dubet, 2002) within REP and CAP contexts. While his personal resilience and linguistic progress are undeniable, they are unlikely to be valorised by macro-level performance frameworks that prioritise general academic achievement over vocational competence. This reproduces the policy blind spot identified in CNESCO (2018) evaluations, where vocational outcomes are treated as secondary to generalist benchmarks.

T's account, with its emphasis on emotional security, draws attention to aspects of schooling systematically ignored by the technocratic logics of OECD governance. His success criterion *"feeling calm in class"* is invisible in PISA's definition of performance, yet it is foundational to his ability to engage and progress. This gap mirrors Harvey and Green's (1993) warning that dominant quality frameworks reduce education to narrow performance indicators, sidelining the transformative and relational dimensions of learning.

5.4 Reconciling Micro-Level Agency with Macro-Level Reform

Taken together, these findings suggest that *situated merit* can serve as a conceptual bridge between structural critique and the recognition of student agency and success. On the one hand, it affirms the structural insights of French sociology: merit is unevenly distributed because it is socially produced and institutionally validated. On the other, it resists epistemic paternalism by valuing the self-definitions of students, even when they appear to align with meritocratic ideals.

Integrating this perspective into policy would require a reframing of evaluative logics at both the national and international levels. Parcoursup could, for instance, incorporate broader qualitative indicators of student achievement, while PISA and similar regimes might acknowledge affective and contextual measures alongside cognitive performance. Such reforms would not dismantle the systemic inequalities embedded in French schooling, but they could reduce the epistemic injustice of treating certain forms of success as invisible or irrelevant.

5.5 Conclusion

This dissertation has introduced the concept of *situated merit* as a challenge to dominant frameworks that frame school success and failure as fixed, objectively measurable outcomes. Instead, it positions these categories as relational, context-bound, and grounded in students' lived realities. Across the three narratives, students articulated definitions of achievement and failure that often diverged sharply from institutional metrics. F., for example, described his perseverance through administrative precarity and late arrival in the French system as his greatest success; an accomplishment invisible to exam scores. T. valued the patience of a teacher who adapted to his dyslexia and dysorthographia as much as any formal qualification. A., despite benefiting from elite schooling, framed her own success in terms of maintaining well-being in a hyper-competitive environment.

By adopting *situated merit* as an evaluative lens, policymakers, educators, and researchers can legitimise such narratives. This requires recognising persistence, emotional resilience, and adaptive capacity as genuine achievements, even when they fall outside standardised performance measures. Equally, it calls for acknowledging forms of "failure" as students experience them; such as the chronic exhaustion from accommodation gaps or the sense of invisibility when support is inconsistent, not simply as deficits in performance but as evidence of systemic shortcomings.

Reframing evaluation in this way shifts it from a top-down act of categorisation to a dialogic process in which institutional definitions are tested against students' own meaning-making. *Situated merit* thus becomes both a conceptual and practical tool for promoting epistemic justice: valuing the knowledge students produce about their own trajectories, and ensuring that recognition of success and failure reflects their situated realities rather than solely the labels imposed upon them.

Because the French educational system remains deeply shaped by deterministic logics and the reproduction of social inequalities, students' achievements, however they are defined, emerge from the interplay between individual effort and structural constraints. Yet within these constraints, students exercise agency, persistence, and creativity. They do have merit: *situated merit*. This merit is rooted in the specific social, institutional, and emotional conditions under which they navigate their education, and it demands recognition, not only as a matter of fairness, but as a necessary step toward a more just and responsive educational system.

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

CENTRAL UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (CUREC)

Ethics Application

Application: From Causality to the Living: Deconstructing the Notion of School Failure and Success in France; Hearing the Students

ID: 1183024

Risk:	Medium
Submitted Date:	13 Feb 2025, 16:04
Applicant:	Mathilde Hasson
Submitter:	Mathilde Hasson
Principal Investigator:	David Johnson
Org Unit:	Education
Project Title:	From Causality to the Living: Deconstructing the Notion of School Failure and Success in France; Hearing the Students
Project Duration:	10 Oct 2024 - 10 Aug 2025
Funder:	*FUNDER NOT LISTED - Email worktribe-ethics@it.ox.ac.uk to add
Project Description:	This study critically examines the notions of school failure and success within the French public education system, centering high school students' perspectives and agency. In France, failure is often framed as a negative outcome attributed to individual shortcomings or systemic dysfunctions, while success is narrowly defined through academic performance. This binary reduces students to passive recipients of external judgments. Drawing on the frameworks of negative capability and epistemic justice, this research deconstructs these conventional definitions, reframing failure as a generative space for growth and meaning-making, and success as a multifaceted, context-dependent phenomenon. By foregrounding students' lived experiences, the study challenges deficit-based narratives and seeks to transcend causal interpretations of failure and success.

Student Project:	Yes - Taught Masters
Supervisor:	David Johnson
Module Code:	

SCOPE

Is this research:	Yes
Not research:	
Human Participant Involvement:	Yes
Research does not involve participants, tissue or personal data:	
Researcher division:	Social Sciences
Taught student module:	No
SSH Minimal Risk:	Yes
Any secondary data:	Yes
Secondary data only:	No
Anonymised secondary Data:	
External ethics review required:	No
Identify NHS staff involvement:	No
Biological samples:	No
Biological samples yes:	
Drug or medicine:	No
Foodstuffs or supplements:	No
Medical device:	No
OxTREC Scope:	No
OxTREC minimal risk:	

RESEARCH TEAM

Principal Investigator:	David Johnson
PI Research Integrity Training:	b. Research Integrity Refresher Course (Experienced researchers)
1a. Research Integrity Core Course Date Completed:	
1b. Research Integrity Refresher Course Date Completed:	
1c. Other Date Completed:	
1c. Other Course Title:	
Is there a student:	Yes
Student Researchers:	Array
Researchers and Training:	Array
External collaborator:	No
External collaborator details:	
Medically qualified collaborator:	No
Medically qualified collaborator details:	
Conflict of Interest:	No
Conflict of Interest Details:	

METHODOLOGY

Short title:	Deconstructing the notion of success and failure in education
Research Summary:	
Location:	
Location Permission:	Yes

Location Permission Details:	School-Level Approval – The primary approval required will be from the school principals (chefs d'établissement), who act as gatekeepers for research conducted within their institutions. Regional Education Authorities (if applicable) – While not always required, some schools may ask for approval from their respective Académie before granting access to researchers. Student Consent – Participants will provide their own informed consent, as they are legally able to do so at 16 years old under French research ethics guidelines.
CUREC Approved Procedure(s):	No
CUREC Approved Procedure(s) yes:	
CUREC Best Practice Guidance:	
International Risky Travel?:	No
International Risky Travel Description:	Yes, this research is being conducted overseas in France. However, it does not involve travel to a potentially risky environment, as the study will take place in public secondary schools within the Île-de-France region, including some institutions in Réseau d'Éducation Prioritaire (REP) areas. While these areas may present socio-economic challenges, they do not pose significant physical risks requiring special travel precautions. Ethical and logistical considerations related to working with schools and students will be addressed in accordance with institutional guidelines and local regulations.
International Risky Travel Reduction:	
Hazardous Substances:	No
Hazardous Substances Description:	
Hazardous Substances Reduction:	
Researcher Distress Potential?:	No
Researcher Distress Potential Description:	
Researcher Distress Potential Reduction:	
Lone Working?:	No
Lone Working Description:	
Lone Working Reduction:	
Non-public Visit?:	No

Non-public Visit Description:	
Non-public Visit Reduction:	
Risk Reduction Training:	
GMO Involved?:	No
GMO Involved? More Info:	
Oversight:	I will be supervised by Professor David Johnson, who will provide regular guidance and oversight throughout the research process. Meetings will be held on a scheduled basis, approximately 3 per school term, to discuss research progress, emerging challenges, and any necessary adjustments to the study design or implementation. Additional meetings will be scheduled as needed, particularly during critical phases such as data collection and analysis. I will be responsible for ensuring that all ethical guidelines are strictly followed, including obtaining informed consent from participants and maintaining confidentiality. If any procedural concerns arise, I will document them and consult my supervisor to determine the appropriate course of action. Additionally, schools may implement their own internal oversight procedures to ensure that research activities align with institutional policies. Although the study is low-risk, any adverse events, ethical concerns, or participant distress will be addressed following a clear response protocol: If a participant exhibits emotional distress during an interview, I will pause or terminate the session and encourage them to seek support from a school counselor or relevant staff member. Any ethical dilemmas or unexpected challenges will be reported to my supervisor, David Johnson, and documented in research logs for transparency. If necessary, adjustments to research methods or interview protocols will be made to prevent future issues. This research does not involve Clinical Trials of Investigational Medicinal Products (CTIMPs), and therefore, no specific procedures related to Data Safety Monitoring Boards (DSMBs) or clinical governance are required.
Research-specific ethical considerations:	Emotional Distress or Psychological Struggles: If a participant expresses significant distress or emotional difficulties related to school failure, I will pause or end the interview and encourage them to seek support from a school counselor or a trusted staff member. I will not act in a therapeutic capacity but will provide guidance on available school support services. Allegations of Abuse or Neglect: If a participant discloses information suggesting they are at risk of harm, neglect, or abuse, I will be ethically and legally required to report the concern to the appropriate school safeguarding officer while ensuring that the participant is informed and supported throughout the

process.
Illegal Activity Disclosures: If a participant shares details of illegal activities, I will follow ethical guidelines that balance confidentiality with legal obligations. In cases where the disclosure suggests potential harm to the participant or others, I will consult my supervisor and, if necessary, report the issue through appropriate school or legal channels.
All data collected will be strictly confidential and stored in accordance with GDPR and Oxford University's data protection policies. Participants will be informed that:
Their identities will be anonymized in all research outputs.
Interview recordings will be securely stored and deleted after transcription.
Any identifying details will be removed from published findings.
If a participant later requests withdrawal of their data, I will comply with their request.

HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

Participants Description:

I aim to interview 10 to 20 students enrolled in public secondary schools in France. The participants will be selected using purposive sampling, with a focus on students from institutions within the Île-de-France region for accessibility.

Sample size justification:

The number of participants (10 to 20 students) was determined based on the qualitative nature of the study and the methodology employed. This research does not rely on statistical generalization but instead seeks to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of students regarding academic failure in the French public education system. The chosen sample size aligns with qualitative research standards, particularly within semi-structured interviews, where a smaller number of participants allows for in-depth thematic analysis while ensuring a diverse range of perspectives.

Participant Inclusion Criteria:

Age: Participants must be 16 years old or older at the time of the study to ensure they can legally provide their own informed consent under French research ethics guidelines.
Enrollment Status: Participants must be currently enrolled in a public secondary school in France, ensuring that their experiences align with the study's focus on the French public education system.
Location: The study will take place in Île-de-France, with an emphasis on students attending schools in Réseau d'Éducation Prioritaire (REP) institutions to ensure diverse socio-economic representation.
Linguistic Criteria: Participants must be fluent in French, as interviews and data collection instruments will be conducted in French.
Willingness to Participate: Participants must provide informed consent, acknowledging their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time.

Participant Exclusion Criteria:	Age Restriction: Students under the age of 16 will be excluded, as they cannot legally provide independent informed consent under French research ethics guidelines. Enrollment Status: Students who are not enrolled in a public secondary school in France (e.g., those in private or international schools) will be excluded, as the study focuses on the French public education system. Geographical Limitation: Students outside the Île-de-France region will not be included, as the study is limited to schools within this area for feasibility and consistency. Language Barrier: Students who do not have sufficient fluency in French will be excluded, as all data collection (including interviews and surveys) will be conducted in French. Inability to Provide Informed Consent: Any student who is unable or unwilling to provide informed consent will not be included in the study.
Participant Protected Characteristics:	The only protected characteristic used as an exclusion criterion in this research is age, as participation is restricted to students aged 16 and above. This exclusion is necessary because students under 16 cannot legally provide independent informed consent under French research ethics guidelines. No other protected characteristics (such as disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation) will be used as exclusion criteria. The study aims to be as inclusive as possible, ensuring a diverse range of student experiences are represented.
Participant Identification:	
Vulnerable Participants:	Yes
Vulnerable Participants Description:	Participants in this study may be considered vulnerable due to their age (16 and above) and status as students within the French public secondary education system. While they have the legal capacity to provide informed consent, their institutional setting, socio-economic background, and potential emotional engagement with the research topic require additional ethical considerations. Several factors contribute to their vulnerability: Institutional Power Dynamics: As students, they may feel subtle pressure to participate due to the school environment, despite the voluntary nature of the study. Emotional Sensitivity: Discussing academic failure may evoke distress, particularly for students who have experienced repeated setbacks, disciplinary actions, or feelings of exclusion. Socio-Economic Disadvantage: Some participants will be from Réseau d'Éducation Prioritaire (REP)

schools, where students often face structural barriers to educational success, adding layers of inequality and potential stigma to their experiences.

Privacy and Confidentiality Risks: As the study involves semi-structured interviews, there is a risk that participants may disclose sensitive personal information, requiring careful data handling.

1. Ensuring Voluntary and Informed Participation

Clear Consent Process: Participants will receive a detailed information sheet explaining the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of participation. They will be reminded that they can withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

Non-Coercive Recruitment: Recruitment will be conducted independently of teachers or school staff, ensuring that students do not feel obligated to participate.

2. Emotional and Psychological Well-Being

Pre-Interview Guidance: Before the interview, I will explain that participants can skip any question they find uncomfortable and take a break if needed.

Monitoring Distress: If a participant appears distressed during the interview, I will pause or terminate the session and suggest they seek support from a school counselor or trusted staff member.

No Therapeutic Expectations: While the study explores students' experiences of failure and success, it is not a counseling session. I will ensure that discussions remain within an academic and reflective framework rather than encouraging emotional disclosure beyond comfort levels.

3. Protecting Participant Confidentiality and Privacy

Anonymization of Data: Participants' responses will be fully anonymized in transcripts and publications. No identifying information (e.g., names, school names) will be included in any research output.

Secure Data Storage: All interview recordings and transcripts will be stored securely on encrypted university servers and deleted once the research is completed.

Confidential Interview Setting: Interviews will take place in a private, but safe and supervised, space within the school, ensuring that participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

4. Handling Sensitive Disclosures (Abuse, Harm, or Illegal Activity)

If a participant discloses information suggesting harm, neglect, or abuse, I will follow school safeguarding protocols and report concerns to the designated safeguarding officer while ensuring that the participant is informed and supported throughout the process.

If a participant shares details of illegal activities, I will follow ethical confidentiality guidelines, balancing data protection with any legal obligations to report potential harm to others.

The study will adhere to Oxford University's ethical guidelines and GDPR regulations to ensure data protection and participant safety.

	School principals will act as gatekeepers, ensuring that all research activities align with institutional policies and safeguarding procedures. My supervisor, Professor David Johnson, will provide ongoing oversight, ensuring that ethical concerns are addressed throughout the research process. By implementing these strict ethical protocols, I will ensure that the research is conducted responsibly, safeguarding the well-being, privacy, and autonomy of all participants.
Vulnerable Participants More Information:	Anonymization of Data – Participants will not be required to provide identifying information beyond basic demographic details relevant to the study. Any identifying details that emerge during interviews will be removed or anonymized in transcripts and reports. Pseudonyms – Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym, and no real names will be used in any written records, analysis, or publications. Secure Data Storage – All interview recordings, transcripts, and related data will be stored in password-protected and encrypted digital files. Confidentiality Agreements – Participants will be informed that their responses will remain confidential and will not be shared beyond the scope of this research. Ethical Considerations – The study follows ethical guidelines ensuring that no harm or distress is caused to participants. They will be made aware that they can withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Consent Process – Participants will receive an information sheet explaining the study's purpose and how their data will be protected. They will provide informed consent before participating.
Participant Approach:	
Investigator Influence or Authority:	No
Investigator Influence or Authority detail:	
Participant Investigator Relationship:	There is no existing relationship between the researcher and the participants, as the researcher has no prior connection to the schools or students involved in the study. Participants will be recruited through public secondary schools in Île-de-France, but the researcher does not work at these institutions and has not previously interacted with the students.

Participant Recruit Information:	Participants will be recruited through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling in public secondary schools in the Île-de-France region. Recruitment will take place in coordination with school administrators and teachers, who will help facilitate access to potential participants. Recruitment Methods School Mediation – With the approval of school staff, the researcher will visit selected schools to introduce the study to students. Information Document – A document introducing the research, its purpose, ethical considerations, and participation details has been created. This document will be attached to my CUREC application and will be distributed to students during the recruitment phase. Verbal Explanation – The researcher will provide a brief, in-person explanation of the study to interested students and answer any questions. Participant Information and Consent Forms – Potential participants will receive an information sheet and consent form explaining: - The study's purpose - What participation entails - The voluntary nature of participation - Confidentiality measures and anonymity - Their right to withdraw at any time without consequence By following these procedures, the recruitment process ensures that students receive clear, transparent, and accessible information, allowing them to make an informed decision about participating in the study.
Participant Decision Duration:	Potential participants will have 2 to 3 weeks to decide whether they wish to take part in the study. This timeframe ensures they have sufficient time to review the participant information document, which outlines the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations. It also allows them to ask any questions they may have about their involvement, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of their participation. If needed, they will have the opportunity to discuss their participation with a trusted adult before making a decision. This approach ensures that students do not feel rushed or pressured and can make an informed choice about whether to participate.
Participants Informed Consent:	Yes
Participants Informed Consent More Info:	Process for Obtaining and Recording Informed Consent Since all participants in this study will be aged 16 and above, they are legally able to provide informed

consent without requiring parental or guardian approval under French law. The consent process will be designed to ensure full transparency, voluntary participation, and participant autonomy.

1. Providing Participants with Clear Information
Before participation, students will receive a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) outlining:

The purpose of the research.
What participation involves (interviews, data collection, duration).
Their rights, including voluntary participation, the ability to skip questions, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences.
How their data will be kept confidential and anonymized.
How findings will be used in academic publications and research dissemination.
This document will be written in clear, accessible language, ensuring that participants fully understand the study before agreeing to take part.

2. Obtaining Written Informed Consent
Each participant will be required to sign a written consent form before participating in the research. This form will confirm that they:

Have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.
Understand their rights, including confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal options.
Voluntarily agree to participate.
The signed consent forms will be stored securely and separate from interview data to maintain confidentiality.

3. Confirming Consent Before Interviews
Before each semi-structured interview, I will verbally:

Reiterate key points from the consent form.
Ask if the participant has any questions or concerns.
Confirm they are still willing to proceed with the interview.
This ensures that consent is ongoing rather than a one-time agreement.

4. No Withholding of Information

There is no deception or withholding of critical information in this study. Participants will be fully informed about the nature of the research before agreeing to take part.

5. Withdrawal Process
Participants may withdraw at any time during the research process. If they withdraw:

Any unprocessed data (interview recordings or transcripts) will be deleted.
If anonymization has already been applied, their data will no longer be identifiable and cannot be removed at that stage.
Participants will be informed of the final withdrawal deadline before anonymization occurs.
Ethical Oversight and Compliance
The consent process will follow Oxford University's ethics guidelines and GDPR regulations to ensure full compliance.
Signed consent forms will be stored separately from data to preserve anonymity.
My supervisor, Professor David Johnson, will provide oversight to ensure ethical adherence throughout the research.
By following this rigorous informed consent process, I will ensure that participants fully understand their rights and that their autonomy, privacy, and well-being are protected.

Participants No consent:

Any feedback: No

Participant Feedback:

Withdrawal Arrangements: Participants will be able to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process, without providing a reason and without any negative consequences. If they choose to withdraw before or during their interview, their data will not be recorded or used. If they decide to withdraw after their interview, they may request the removal of their data within a specified timeframe.

Once the data has been fully anonymized and incorporated into the final analysis, it will no longer be possible to remove individual contributions, as they will no longer be identifiable. To ensure clarity, participants will be informed that they have up to four weeks after their interview to request the withdrawal of their data. After this period, the anonymized data will be integrated into the findings, making individual removal impracticable.

	These details will be clearly communicated to participants through the information sheet and consent form, ensuring they fully understand their rights regarding withdrawal before agreeing to take part.
Withdrawal More Information:	Participants will face no consequences if they choose to withdraw from the study. Their decision to withdraw will be entirely voluntary, and it will not affect their academic standing, relationships with their school, or any other aspect of their education. If a participant withdraws before or during the interview, no data will be collected or used. If they withdraw after their interview, they may request that their data be removed within four weeks following their participation. In this case, all identifiable information related to their interview will be deleted. After the four-week period, the data will be fully anonymized and incorporated into the study's analysis, making individual removal impossible. Participants will be made aware of this deadline in the participant information sheet (PIS) and consent form, ensuring they understand their rights and the process for withdrawal.
Participant Deception:	No
CUREC Approved Procedure 07:	
Participant Deception More Info:	
Social Media:	No
Social Media More Info:	
Sensitive Topics:	Yes
Sensitive Topics More Info:	The research involves discussions about academic failure, which may be a sensitive topic for some participants. Students may share personal experiences related to educational struggles, self-perception, social pressures, or systemic barriers, which could evoke feelings of frustration, embarrassment, or distress.
Illegal Behaviour:	No
Illegal Behaviour More Info:	
Awareness Disclosure Harm:	No
Awareness Disclosure Harm More Info:	
Risk of Injury:	No

Risk of Injury More Information:	
Risk of Injury Mitigation:	
Invasive Procedures:	No
Invasive Procedures More Information:	
DBS Check:	No
Participant Compensation:	No
Compensation Details:	
Undue Incentives:	
Undue Incentives More Info:	
Compensation After Withdrawal:	

SECURITY

Security More Information:	
Security Risk Mitigation:	
Prevent duty:	No
Prevent duty Mitigation:	

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Environmental Impact:	The research will have no significant environmental impact, as it primarily involves qualitative interviews conducted in public secondary schools. The study does not require the use of any equipment, materials, or techniques that could negatively affect the environment, ecology, or local communities. The research process is low-impact, as data collection will be conducted digitally whenever possible to minimize paper use, and in-person interviews will take place within existing school facilities, avoiding any disruption to the natural or built environment.
Environmental Impact Monitored:	Since the research has no significant environmental impact, the steps to minimize any minor effects will focus on reducing resource consumption and ensuring sustainability throughout the research process.

DATA MANAGEMENT

Data Type:

The research will collect and process qualitative data to explore students' perceptions and experiences of academic failure in the French public education system. This will include demographic and socio-economic background information such as age, gender, ethnicity, household composition, and self-reported cultural identity. These details will be collected using a structured framework based on the Economic, Social, and Cultural Status (ESCS) index developed by the OECD for the PISA assessment to ensure consistency and comparability.

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted, focusing on four thematic areas: engagement with education, perceptions of success and failure, influences on these perceptions, and aspirations. The interviews will be recorded in audio format, with participants' consent, to ensure accuracy in transcription and analysis. The data will be anonymized during transcription, with any identifiable details removed to protect participants' confidentiality.

No sensitive health, financial, or online tracking data will be collected. The research follows ethical guidelines to ensure participants' privacy, and all data will be securely stored and processed solely for the purpose of the study. The data management plan, which outlines storage and anonymization procedures, is attached to this application.

Data Access Control?: No

Data Access Control? More Info:

Data Storage Location:

All data collected during the project will be securely stored using Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, the University of Oxford's approved storage system, and Microsoft Teams, as recommended in my Foundations of Educational Research (FER) class.

During data collection, written consent forms will be stored digitally in password-protected folders within Nexus 365. If any forms are collected in physical format, they will be digitized and securely transferred to Nexus 365, after which the physical copies will be shredded.

Audio recordings of interviews will be stored temporarily on a password-protected recording device and transferred to an encrypted folder on Nexus 365 as soon as possible. Once the recordings are securely stored, they will be deleted from the recording device. These recordings will only be retained until

transcription is complete, after which they will be permanently deleted.

Transcriptions and anonymized interview data will be securely stored in Nexus 365 OneDrive. When necessary for collaboration, restricted access will be granted through Microsoft Teams to ensure confidentiality. Identifiable information will be removed during transcription, and no personally identifying details will be included in research outputs.

Any physical notes taken during the research process will be digitized and stored securely in Nexus 365. Once digitized, the original paper copies will be shredded.

Data will be retained securely for the duration of the research project and deleted in accordance with University of Oxford guidelines. Any data kept for long-term verification purposes will be fully anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality. These details will be clearly communicated to participants in the information sheets to ensure they are fully informed.

Data Storage Period:

To ensure compliance with relevant legislation, including the UK GDPR, Data Protection Act 2018, Digital Economy Act, and Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations, the following steps will be taken:

All participants will provide informed consent before data collection begins. They will receive an information sheet explaining their rights, the purpose of the research, how their data will be used, and their ability to withdraw at any time. No data will be collected without explicit consent.

Data minimization principles will be followed, meaning only the necessary information will be collected to achieve the research objectives. Personal identifiers will be avoided, and all transcripts will be fully anonymized, with identifying details removed or replaced with pseudonyms. Additionally, non-identifiable data will be collected from the schools, such as their general location (e.g., the neighborhood in which they are situated) and whether they are public or private institutions. However, no information will be gathered that would allow individual schools to be identified.

All data will be stored securely using Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, the University of Oxford’s approved encrypted storage system. No data will be stored on unprotected USB drives, personal devices, or third-party cloud services. Access will be restricted to the researcher, and if sharing is necessary, it will only be with the supervisor via Nexus 365.

Audio recordings will be securely deleted as soon as transcription and anonymization are complete.

Consent forms will be retained securely for the required period before being permanently deleted.

After the completion of the project, all data will be securely retained in accordance with University of Oxford guidelines and research ethics requirements. All anonymized interview transcripts and related research data will be stored in Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business for a period of three years after the project's completion, following institutional data retention policies. This allows for research verification while ensuring long-term data security. Even after the researcher has left the university, the data will remain securely stored under the supervision of the project's academic supervisor. After the retention period, the data will be permanently deleted from the storage system.

No automated decision-making or profiling will be conducted using the data. Participants will have the right to request data withdrawal within a specified timeframe, ensuring compliance with data subject rights under UK GDPR.

By implementing these measures, the study will fully comply with data protection laws and ethical research standards, ensuring the confidentiality, security, and integrity of participants' data.

Data Retention Reuse: No, the data collected for this research will not be used in future research or made available to other research projects.

Data Destruction:

At the end of the research project, all data will be permanently deleted to ensure confidentiality and compliance with University of Oxford data protection policies.

All electronic files, including interview transcripts, anonymized research data, and consent forms, will be securely deleted from Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business using permanent deletion methods to prevent recovery. Any audio recordings will be deleted as soon as transcription and anonymization are complete.

If any physical documents (such as printed consent forms or notes) exist, they will be shredded and disposed of securely once they are no longer needed.

Data Access: Access to the data will be strictly controlled using physical and technical security measures to ensure confidentiality and compliance with University of Oxford data protection policies.

All electronic data, including interview transcripts, consent forms, and anonymized research materials, will be stored in Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, which provides encrypted, university-approved storage.

	Access to these files will be restricted to the researcher, with no external sharing or third-party access. Documents will be password-protected, and editing rights will be restricted to the researcher, preventing unauthorized modifications or downloads. Any audio recordings will be stored on a password-protected device before being securely transferred to Nexus 365. Once the recordings have been transcribed and anonymized, they will be permanently deleted. If any physical documents are required, such as consent forms or handwritten notes, they will be kept in a locked and secure location, accessible only to the researcher. These documents will be digitized as soon as possible and securely destroyed once no longer needed.
Organisation Data:	No
Organisation Data More Info:	
Recording:	Yes
Recording More Info:	Audio recording is necessary to ensure accurate data collection and transcription of participants' responses during the semi-structured interviews. Given the qualitative nature of this research, recording the interviews allows for a detailed analysis of students' perspectives on academic failure without the risk of misinterpretation or loss of important nuances. I will use an external microphone rather than my phone. To ensure that only participants who have given informed consent are recorded, each participant will receive an information sheet and consent form explaining the purpose of the research, the use of audio recordings, and their right to withdraw. Participants will provide written consent before any recording takes place, and at the beginning of each interview, I will verbally confirm their consent again before starting the recording. If a participant does not consent to being recorded, they will not participate in the interview. The recordings will be securely stored in Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, ensuring restricted access and compliance with ethical guidelines. Once the interviews are transcribed and anonymized, the audio files will be permanently deleted to protect participants' confidentiality. These measures ensure that data collection is ethical, secure, and limited only to those who have explicitly agreed to participate in the study.
Participant Data Confidentiality:	Confidentiality will be ensured throughout the research process, from data collection to the release of findings, through strict ethical and technical safeguards.

During data collection, all interviews will be audio-recorded using an external microphone and stored in Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, the University of Oxford’s secure storage system. Access to the recordings will be strictly limited to the researcher, and no personal identifying information will be linked to the audio files. Once transcription and anonymization are complete, the original recordings will be permanently deleted to eliminate any risk of identification.

During transcription, all identifiable details, such as participants' names, specific locations, or any information that could indirectly reveal their identity, will be removed or replaced with pseudonyms. The anonymized transcripts will be stored in password-protected, encrypted folders within Nexus 365, ensuring that only the researcher has access.

In the release of findings, all data will be fully anonymized before publication or presentation. No identifying details will be included in any reports, and direct quotes from participants will be carefully reviewed to ensure they do not contain information that could lead to identification. The final research outputs will only present generalized themes and insights, maintaining the confidentiality of all participants.

These measures ensure that participants' data remains secure, anonymous, and protected at every stage of the research process.

Participant Data Anonymity: No

Participant Data Anonymity More Info: Anonymity will be ensured throughout the research process, from data collection to the release of findings, through careful anonymization strategies and secure data handling.

During data collection, participants will not be required to provide any personally identifying details beyond basic demographic information relevant to the study. Audio recordings will not include participants' names, and if a participant mentions any identifying information during the interview, it will be removed during transcription.

In the transcription process, all identifiable information, such as names, school names, locations, and any references to specific people or events that could reveal a participant’s identity, will be replaced with pseudonyms or omitted entirely. The transcripts will then be securely stored in Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business in a password-protected, encrypted folder accessible only to the researcher.

In the release of findings, only fully anonymized data will be used. Direct quotes from participants will be

	reviewed to ensure they do not contain any identifying details. Any demographic information will be presented in a way that prevents individual identification, using broad categories rather than specific attributes. These procedures ensure that participants' identities remain fully anonymous at every stage of the research, safeguarding their privacy and ensuring ethical data handling.
Participant Data Pseudoanon:	Yes
Participant Data Pseudoanon More Info:	The linking information, which connects participants' real identities to their pseudonyms, will be retained only for the duration necessary to complete data collection and analysis. Once transcription and anonymization are finalized, the linkage file will be securely deleted, which is expected to occur within six months after the conclusion of data collection. Access to this linking information will be strictly limited to the principal researcher, me, Mathilde Hasson. No other researchers, participants, or external parties will have access to these records. If a participant decides to withdraw from the study, their identifying information and any linked data will be permanently deleted to ensure their confidentiality. To safeguard this information, the linkage file will be stored separately from the research data to minimize the risk of re-identification. It will be securely kept on a password-protected, encrypted drive that complies with institutional and GDPR guidelines. If any physical copies exist, they will be locked in a secure cabinet and shredded as soon as they are no longer needed. Although pseudonyms will be used to anonymize participants, some contextual details—such as the name of the school or certain responses to the questionnaire—may still pose a risk of indirect identification. To mitigate this risk, schools will not be directly named in any published findings and will instead be referred to in general terms, such as "a public high school in [region]." Identifiable details will be generalized where necessary, and responses containing sensitive information will be aggregated to prevent the identification of individual participants. By implementing these measures, the research ensures that participants' identities remain protected while maintaining the integrity of the study.
Publication:	To address any risks associated with publishing the data or research findings, several steps will be taken to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and ethical integrity.

All data will be fully anonymized before analysis and publication. Identifiable information, including participant names, school names, locations, and any contextual details that could indirectly reveal identities, will be removed or replaced with pseudonyms. Direct quotes used in publications will be carefully reviewed to ensure they do not contain identifying details.

To further minimize risks, data triangulation will be used in a way that prevents individual identification. Findings will be presented through aggregated themes and patterns, ensuring that no single participant's experience is traceable. When discussing demographic variations, broad categories rather than specific attributes will be used to avoid re-identification risks.

The final research outputs will be carefully reviewed before publication to ensure that all presented data meets ethical and legal standards. Participants will also be made aware, through the consent process, of how their anonymized responses may be used in research publications.

These measures will ensure that no individual can be identified through the publication of findings, maintaining the integrity and confidentiality of the research.

SECONDARY DATA

Data from individuals no longer alive:	No
Identify living individuals:	No
Secondary Data Sources:	Array
Linkage:	No
Linkage yes:	
Identifiability:	No
Identifiability yes:	
Special Data Category:	No
Special Data Details:	
Object to the re-use of the data:	No

Re-use of Data Details:	
Identifiable data:	The original data should not be shared with anyone. However, if sharing becomes necessary, it will only be with my supervisor and will be done through Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, the University of Oxford's secure, encrypted storage platform.
Fairly and lawfully:	Yes
Is the data publicly available?:	No
Data access agreements:	No
Data Agreement:	Yes
Data Linkage Project:	No
Data Linkage identifiable individuals:	
Profiling:	
Digital Economy Act, Data Protection Act 2018, UK GDPR, Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations:	To ensure compliance with relevant legislation, including the UK GDPR, Data Protection Act 2018, Digital Economy Act, and Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations, the following steps will be taken: All participants will provide informed consent before data collection begins. They will receive an information sheet explaining their rights, the purpose of the research, how their data will be used, and their ability to withdraw at any time. No data will be collected without explicit consent. Data minimization principles will be followed, meaning only the necessary information will be collected to achieve the research objectives. Personal identifiers will be avoided, and all transcripts will be fully anonymized, with identifying details removed or replaced with pseudonyms. Additionally, non-identifiable data will be collected from the schools, such as their general location (e.g., the neighborhood in which they are situated) and whether they are public or private institutions. However, no information will be gathered that would allow individual schools to be identified. All data will be stored securely using Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, the University of Oxford's approved encrypted storage system. No data will be stored on unprotected USB drives, personal devices, or third-party cloud services. Access will be restricted to the researcher, and if sharing is necessary, it will only be with the supervisor via Nexus 365. Audio recordings will be securely deleted as soon as transcription and anonymization are complete.

Consent forms will be retained securely for the required period before being permanently deleted.

No automated decision-making or profiling will be conducted using the data. Participants will have the right to request data withdrawal within a specified timeframe, ensuring compliance with data subject rights under UK GDPR.

By implementing these measures, the study will fully comply with data protection laws and ethical research standards, ensuring the confidentiality, security, and integrity of participants' data.

Publication:

To address any risks associated with publishing the data or research findings, several steps will be taken to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and ethical integrity.

All data will be fully anonymized before analysis and publication. Identifiable information, including participant names, school names, locations, and any contextual details that could indirectly reveal identities, will be removed or replaced with pseudonyms. Direct quotes used in publications will be carefully reviewed to ensure they do not contain identifying details.

To further minimize risks, data triangulation will be used in a way that prevents individual identification. Findings will be presented through aggregated themes and patterns, ensuring that no single participant's experience is traceable. When discussing demographic variations, broad categories rather than specific attributes will be used to avoid re-identification risks.

The final research outputs will be carefully reviewed before publication to ensure that all presented data meets ethical and legal standards. Participants will also be made aware, through the consent process, of how their anonymized responses may be used in research publications.

These measures will ensure that no individual can be identified through the publication of findings, maintaining the integrity and confidentiality of the research.

Publication of Results:

HUMAN TISSUE

Training:

Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford, OX2 6PY
Phone: +44 (0) 1865 274024





MSc Student in International and Comparative Education
Mathilde Hasson
mathilde.hasson@st-annes.ox.ac.uk

Consent to take part in "*From Causality to the Living: Deconstructing the Notion of Academic Failure and Success in France; Hearing the Students*"

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: **xxxxx**

Purpose of Study: This research aims to contribute novel insights into the notion of school failure and success within the French educational system.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point, without giving any reason.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from any publications.	

I consent to being audio recorded. ☐

I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs. ☐

Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):

a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or** ☐

b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable. **or** ☐

c) I agree to the use of direct quotations, attributed to my name, in research outputs. ☐

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint. ☐

I agree to take part. I hereby assign to the researcher all copyright in my contribution for use in all work stemming from this project and future projects. ☐

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date[2]	Signature

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