The Role of Education as a Cultural Construct in the United States and France

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Abstract:

France and the United States often have opposing cultural value systems that arise from the ideologies of their political foundations and are mirrored in the structuring of their school systems. While both are historical allies and were founded as democratic republics, France and the United States experience common cross-cultural misunderstandings. This is caused by the divergent social ideals for the structure of government authority and individual autonomy. American culture tends to view education as a private or local concern, thus allowing for increased adaptability and individualized educational pursuits. However, the structure perpetuates significant gaps in accessibility to quality education due to socio-economic class. French culture values fixed systematization and places education as a public concern on the national level. Therefore the structure meets efforts for equality in mass education, but limits development and adaptation. As the demands of greater society change and the needs of the labor market shift, an educational system must adapt in response. The United States and France thus face different challenges in reacting to this evolution. They must address these changing demands within the limitations of structure and cultural values produced by their original frameworks of political ideology.

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Spending a semester studying at a French university gave me first-hand insight into French society and the French educational system and how vastly different they functioned from what I was used to in the United States. The experience constantly surprised me, but made more and more sense as I settled in and really came to understand the culture of living in French society. From the moment I told friends and family that I was going to study in France, I endured constant comments critical of France and French people. I had my fair share of complaints and difficulties with acclimating myself to the cultural practices and expectations of my new environment, but after time I found myself becoming very defensive of negative comments against France that resulted from cultural misunderstandings between differing French and American value systems. First-hand exposure to the culture, with personal conversations and observances, put cultural stereotypes into perspective for me. Since my role there was as a student, my attention was driven towards focusing on the educational experience. I had learned bits and pieces of logistical details about primary and secondary education, of which I crafted a personal impression of a rigorous and strict system. My curiosity heightened during my time there and then again when I returned home, as I realized how differently the two systems functioned. I desired to understand how and why those differences came about and to attempt to connect those differences to the histories of the social and political foundations of the two countries.

From Day one in France, I knew my educational experience would be a big break from what I was used to. I was a product of mass education, attending traditional public school through twelfth grade. My schooling focused on development of basic skills. I experienced more progressive education through attendance at a liberal arts college. Here I have received
increased freedom of choice with courses in different disciplines, close interaction with professors, and academic work focusing on critical analysis. Being reared in American culture has also showered me with the ideal of the American Dream. This trained me to believe that I have control over my own fate and can alter my career path at any point I choose. When I went to school in France, I got a very different impression of how students perceived their own freedom of individual opportunity and how they view the role of their country and their government in their personal lives. Where I felt comfort with open-ended opportunities for my future, many of the French people I talked to felt a comfort with knowing exactly what was expected of them and where they were headed.

I also quickly recognized the differences regarding access to information and the degree of student control over their educational experience. I was surprised at how difficult it was for me to obtain details concerning course offerings, especially when trying to schedule courses that crossed over different disciplines of study. My problems dealing with information access and a lack of course flexibility was not a problem for the typical French student. A French student launches their school experience focused on a specific major discipline with a set course plan with an overall uniform makeup for all students within a particular discipline. Relatively standardized educational paths are created with little room for individualism. I was also surprised at how difficult it was to utilize professors as a resource to help guide me in my educational direction and performance. In France, I had mostly large classes of 75+ students. Telephone numbers or email addresses for my professors were non-existent. I had only one professor who offered a single, one-hour weekly block of time for office hours. All other professors provided nothing more than scheduled class time. The lack of individual attention and guidance from professors did not seem to register as a concern for the French students.
Expectations for their work were steadfast and clearly established. Therefore, from their viewpoint, there was no need for personalized educational experiences or guidance.

I also learned the difference in approaches for dissemination of information during class. I took courses both at the International School and the regular French university, all of which were lecture courses with large student populations. Information was presented as fact, never open for discussion. Even in a sociology course, theory was presented to be memorized. Students studied the work of four well-known French sociologists, with the professor presenting their concepts and arguments but never questioning their thinking. The course grade was exclusively based on a group presentation and final exam, both of which involved nothing more than presenting the factual theories of one of the four sociologists. The absence of analysis and critical thinking was shocking to me, offering no real personal intellectual challenge. The structure of the course coupled with the professor’s attitude provided no opportunity for curriculum changes and improvements.

I also experienced some insightful conversations that made me further realize the differences between the French and U.S. educational systems and the intensity of competition within American higher education and the American labor market. One student was intrigued to hear me discuss my educational experiences in the United States because she had no appreciation for the differences between the countries. She was shocked to learn the typical cost of a U.S. college education and the intensity for initial admittance. She didn’t understand how access to education could be so unequal based on individual wealth. Conversely, I was shocked to hear that university education in France is publicly financed, and that she paid only the equivalent of a few hundred U.S. dollars in annual taxes for her degree. The approach to French educational financing sounded like a smart idea to me, but also a bit socialist.
I had an equally interesting conversation with a young Frenchman related to a critique of the American cultural ideal of an over commitment by Americans to their jobs. He thought that only in America could the concept of “employee of the month” be invented and supported. He saw the honor as merely a trick for employers to expect people to work harder and longer for a recognition that had no real direct payoff. He didn’t understand why American workers would want to subject themselves to this sort of motivation; he thought such concepts prevented people from realizing they should be taking more time to sit back, relax and enjoy themselves (much like he and I were doing at this conversation, with some wine at an outdoor café). What I derived from this man and his comments was a sense of community in which citizens knew their role and did not see the need to emphasize individual competition. Expectations and opportunities were clearly established and the cultural norm of priority on personal time overshadowed any desire to get ahead of others. I began to see a real divide between French and American philosophies in relation to the promotion of competition and expectations for job opportunities.

Studying in France at the time of the outbreak of the war in Iraq also gave me an intensified, first-hand look into the misunderstandings between the two countries. Because France took a stance against the war and the United States, I was able to see the anti-American sentiments pervading the media and citizen protests. France did not agree with nor understand why the United States took such an aggressive stance on addressing problems that were outside of our boarders. I could clearly see the French emphasis on national community and national interests and problems rather than be overly concerned with issues on an international scale. I noticed this “embrace” of national culture in so many areas. I observed what could best be described as over-confidence in French culture – an intense assurance of its quality and value. I
could see the hesitance to seek-out or welcome outside cultures. I saw it in the debates arising over the educational system’s fight to keep women from wearing the traditional Muslim headscarf in schools. I saw this as an overt rejection of cultural differences that did not blindly accept and adhere to French cultural norms. I also was surprised to see just how little French students used the Internet. In the United States, seeking out information on the Internet is as habitual as brushing one’s teeth. In my dorm there was one computer for 100 students; at my university there was a computer lab with 50 computers for about 15,000 students. Surprisingly, I never experienced much of a wait for access to any of these computers. I was shocked to see how students are asked to accept the information presented in their classes and how infrequently they sought outside information or alternative opinions with a connection to exposure of outside influences or communities.

I do not at all think that my one semester in France has made me an expert on French culture, but I do feel I have a better understanding and a profound curiosity to understand the origins of that culture. I experienced the logistical differences between the form and function of French and American educational systems and how they reflected cultural principles. I realized that culture is so much more than the way people dress, the food they eat, and the activities they perform; it very much encompasses the way people think, the way they view the world and their society and their own role in relation to it. I learned that the educational systems are products of political and social foundations, perpetuating cultural ideals by raising students to think and operate within the principles and narrow confines of a particular cultural framework. My questions that rose out of these realizations and experiences stimulated me to explore these issues in depth within this paper.
Introduction

France and the United States take two distinct approaches to their educational systems and their means of connecting the individual to the labor market. The United States is characterized by variant and individualized opportunities in education; a pre-established, collective framework of linear order characterizes French education. These educational principles are by-products of governmental founding principles and reoccurring national ideals. With these divergent principles and opposing social makeup, France and the United States have established distinct approaches to the issues of balancing the roles of education in response to two frameworks of addressing the service of the needs of the society versus the needs of the individual. The *schooling paradigm* is one where individuals are trained within an established framework to prepare to fill roles established by society. The opposing *educational paradigm* is one where variant forms of intelligence are nurtured and the educational experience is individualized. As developed nations, France and the United States struggle with the complexity of the well-established educational system’s role in addressing the balance between these two paradigms.

In order for a society to function socially and economically, it is essential that citizens are trained and divided to fill the specific needs that enable an overall functioning society. The responsibility for this division is born in large part by the educational system. France and the United States struggle each in a unique way to respect and support the needs and desires of its citizens while attempting to ensure that talent is divided into varying levels of necessary labor skills. The ways in which the two countries address this struggle within their school systems function as reflections of their national ideals and social value systems. While France and the United States share similar democratic ideals central to the foundation of their governments, with
the principle of “government for the people and by the people”, they have established distinct frameworks within which these ideals are manifested. The elements related to the establishment of their governments have also determined the ways in which all societal organizations are created. The school systems are the most significant social organizations, thus they serve as the most direct and influential product of the establishment of these societies.

The national ideals of France and the United States result in educational ideologies that serve to perpetuate these values by permeating the teaching and curriculum standards in schools. A study of the ways in which these two countries have manifested their national ideals through the practices of their school systems can be conducted through two divergent frameworks – a schooling paradigm or an educational paradigm. A schooling paradigm explains an approach related to locating and utilizing the skilled parts of an individual with the goal of training them in a way that will best serve the needs of society. An educational paradigm addresses the approach where the distinguishing skills and needs of each individual are recognized and encouraged to be enriched. Throughout its history, the United States has retained a national ideal of constantly questioning governmental authority, along with a requirement to address the needs of an increasingly heterogeneous society. France has an overall homogeneous society, with a history deeply rooted in its bureaucratic tradition and strong ties to national culture and identity. The United States receives continual internal pressure from its citizens to function within an educational paradigm, placing the needs of the individual first. However, as an economically powerful country, the United States still depends greatly on the division of resources to fulfill unskilled labor roles, highly skilled professional jobs, and every job in between – a need for the individual to serve society’s needs consistent with the schooling paradigm. Traditionally, France functions with an emphasis on continuity and constancy, with much more rigid ways of doing
things. They function more within an overall inflexible system of dividing citizens into their respective societal roles, a dissection strongly tied to the *schooling paradigm*. However, France suffers from external pressures to respond to pressures towards globalization and acceptance of international cultures outside their own, forcing an increasing acceptance of an *educational paradigm*. Thus, France and the United States experience unique struggles with balancing educational ideologies as they emerge with particular historical social and political ideologies, amending them within the changing demands on the school systems as sociological and economic transformation agents.

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**Political Frameworks**

**French Government**

France attained its current status as a democratic republic with the creation of the Constitution for the Fifth Republic in 1958. A strong bureaucratic government characterizes the country, with power centralized at the national level. The citizens elect the government officials, but they retain a strong, rigid power once in office. The people have the power to choose the government, but once chosen, they essentially hand over regulatory control of the country to the elected leaders. France’s principles for the foundation of its government are vested in democratic ideals of a “government of the people, by the people and for the people” (the one underlying government principle, borrowed from American Abraham Lincoln and placed in Line 5 in Article 2 of the French Constitution) (Carcassonne 1). The government actually functions as a democratic republic. These principles are rooted in the fundamental necessity for a government to be established by a constitution that accomplishes two things – guarantees the rights of
citizens and provides for a separation of powers. This is consistent with the commonly European idea of simplistic democratic theory favoring a strong, centralized national government that works to still preserve individual rights. Article 1 of the 1958 French Constitution states, “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race, or religion. It shall respect all beliefs” (Baubérot 1).

The national constitution explicitly lays out the separation of powers in the French government, broken down into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The constitution of the Fifth Republic strengthened power of the executive branch against the legislative. The executive division splits between President and Prime Minister. The President serves as the head of the state and the most significant government figure as a symbol of the nation, elected by “direct universal suffrage” for a five-year term. He has the power to select the Prime Minister, who then proposes the appointment of other governmental members. The Prime Minister can “… call a referendum, dissolve the National Assembly, negotiate and ratify treaties, and even take the initiative of proposing a revision of the Constitution.” The Prime Minister has the bulk of executive power at his disposal, as the day-to-day leader of the government. He serves as the link between the President and the parliamentary majority in the legislative branch. These interests normally align, and a political majority generally runs the French government. When the President loses the support of the political majority, which has only happened twice in national history, the Prime Minister and the President function on an increasingly equal level politically. Executive power is then contingent on the political makeup of the legislature.

The French legislature consists of a rationalized parliamentary system, comprised of the National Assembly and the Senate. The National Assembly is a representation of the people,
557 representatives elected by “direct, universal suffrage” via an electoral system. Alternately, the Senate is representative of the local French authorities. 321 Senators are elected by “indirect universal suffrage”, chosen by locally elected representatives, serving “as a stronghold of the conservative forces in France”. Essentially, the Senate possesses the same degree of legislative power as the National Assembly. However, in the event of a disagreement, the Assembly makes the definitive decision (Carcassonne 3). In this way, French voters have a significant say in the establishment of their government via the ability to shape the political makeup of the government’s executive and legislative branches.

The Constitution also allows for the establishment of a judiciary branch. This branch, however, is “not a power in its own right. The judge’s duty is strictly to interpret and apply the law and is not recognized as a real creator of the law” (Carcassonne 4). Rather than being proactively involved in the judgment of the validity of the law, the courts are strict interpreters of the current law. This is the most obvious example of the rigid power that France’s constitutional foundation affords the national government. The people are granted democratic sovereignty in the power to elect their government officials. The government then becomes a strong national republic via significant power vested in the centralized bureaucratic system. There exists then an inherent relinquishment of power and trust from the people into the hands of the government. The people sacrifice a certain amount of personal involvement and influence in government in exchange for a consistent, centrally strengthened power that governs uniformly across the country.
United States Government

In 1776, the ratification of the federal Constitution established the United States as a democratic republic. A majority of Americans tend to view the country as a pure democracy, when in actuality the official foundation is as a republic, as in everyone has an individual voice in elections of government officials but these elections hand over representative power to the officials. The Pledge of Allegiance is addressed “to the republic, for which it stands.” The United States government is also a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people”, with elected representatives to support the interests of the people. The government is a federalist system, with power divided between state and national governments to balance control. This decentralized system has established an American ideal that recognizes the importance of an overarching republic government in regulatory control, but places a greater value in democratic values and powers of citizenship.

The first attempt to join the original thirteen U.S. colonies was made through the Articles of Confederation. This document failed because it did not provide for the creation of a sufficiently strong centralized national government. The union as a nation required that states retain their individual autonomy while having a strong regulatory agent to create a unified national front. The United States Constitution achieved this objective in 1776. This document successfully established the breakdown of power for the national government and allotted “inalienable” rights of citizenship for all Americans via the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights is actually a set of laws that limits the power of the government. A limited number of rights were enumerated for the federal government, with a significant degree of power reserved solely for the control of state governments. These powers cannot be threatened through amendments to the
Federal Constitution. Thus a successful centralized government was established with limited power and an emphasis was placed on state autonomy and individual rights.

The U.S. federal government is also broken down laterally into the legislative, executive, and judicial branches (meant to create, enact, and judge the laws respectively). This breakdown is intended to ensure that no one person or group achieves a monopoly of power on the federal level. Americans vote for the President of the United States and the bi-cameral legislature of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, expecting the elected officials to represent the people, their interests and needs. The judicial branch is enacted to judge the validity of laws and their accordance with the federal Constitution. Criminal and civil courts address the interpretation of laws for specific cases, but also can overturn instated laws when their constitutionality is called into question. America is often thought of as a country characterized by its quantity of laws. There is a significant focus on the balance of power, as evidenced by the fact that any one citizen can instigate the reversal of a federal law. Thus, while a majority opinion may have propagated the creation of a particular law, a minority opinion can also successfully overturn it.

Those powers not vested in the national government are reserved for state government control. Sectors such as education and transportation are, for the most part, state mandated. This ensures that decision-making power is dissipated across levels so as to protect varying local interests within the federalist system. This fosters an American principle rooted in the desire to spread political power. There often exists a lack of trust in government, with citizens frequently questioning governmental initiatives and goals. The federal government serves as the protector of individual rights against the encroachment of governmental power. The U.S. then has created a governmental foundation of decentralized power that propagates a desire to emphasize local and individual needs over strong, centralized power.
Role Of And Attitudes Towards Government

France and the U.S. have manifested their founding ideals as democratic republics in divergent ways. These differences have established diverse value systems for the ways in which Americans and the French view governmental authority and individual influence in society. Both function as representative governments, with officials elected to act on behalf of citizens’ interests. However, the established frameworks, within which the governments function, establish different expectations for the attainment and exercise of political power. Therefore, citizens of the respective countries create alternate views on the roles of government versus individuals in society.

The respective governments create frameworks for expectations and values related to governmental influence, both in an overarching sense and with respect to day-to-day activities. These foundations create ideas about the ways in which individuals are motivated and able to exercise or attain their own political power. One of the mediums for this is the respective Constitution of both countries. The French Constitution is a solid document for the foundation of the national government, built upon the French ideal that a Constitution should provide for the separation of powers and guarantee rights for citizens. There exists a structured separation of powers across the national level, ensuring that power is spread amongst separate individuals and groups. The Constitution also has foundations in the document “The Rights of Man”, and securely allocates the protection of individual liberties. The United States Constitution provides for a similar separation of powers and guarantees civil rights via the Bill of Rights. The differences, however, are the ways in which the respective constitutions allot direct power to individual citizens and influence societal roles.
The United States Constitution establishes a federalist system, allotting power to state
governments rather than an exclusive national body. Each state then reserves the opportunity to
govern as they choose (as long as the actions remain compliant with the federal Constitution.)
The Constitution is viewed as America’s pinnacle protector of civil liberties, a set of laws meant
to prevent the encroachment of governmental authority on an individual’s “life, liberty, and
pursuit of happiness”. Due to the vast amount of power vested in the Constitution’s authority
and the great comfort citizens take from this protection, the Constitution has evolved into a
defining symbol of American identity. Americans place a premium on constitutional authority,
commonly citing amendments from the Bill of Rights as a mechanism for defense of personal
actions. Conversely, the French Constitution has not evolved to a similar prominence in French
society. The Constitution does not serve as a cultural representation of national values related to
government to the extent that it does in the United States. It is simply an element of the overall
political system. The emphasis is on the French national government itself as opposed to the
Constitution. Individual questioning of political power is not facilitated in a standardized,
protected fashion the way it is in the American Constitution. Thus French citizens tend to stand
in support of governmental authority, viewing the unified governmental power as a means for
increased political power as a nation.

Consequently, due to the different models for affording powers to citizens against
governmental action, two ways of exercising this power emerge. In relation to judicial power,
France does not include a mechanism for individual citizens to attempt to overturn laws. The
judicial branch serves to interpret established laws, not to pass judgment on them. Conversely,
via judicial review, a single American citizen can bring a case to the United States Supreme
Court to overturn a law. Both countries elect their government officials based on the expectation
that they will protect their interests. This places immense power at the will of citizens during
election time, but limits individual power during an official’s time in office. American citizens
are allowed the opportunity for judicial review against current and past legislators. Even cases
that may not be completed in a fashion that benefits the individual in time can be won to ensure
the protection of future minority and majority interests. Therefore, Americans have a
standardized mechanism to question governmental authority, guaranteeing a process that allows
for the institutionalized protection of the rights of minority interests.

Once elections in France are finalized, most political power remains within the
governments’ control. The lack of judicial review coupled with the strength and rigidity of the
bureaucratic system prevents the institutionalization of individual opportunity for challenging
political authority. Thus, if French citizens choose to question the government, they are left with
the option to strike as their most effective means of gaining attention – a common occurrence in
the country. It is not unusual for national strikes to be staged on a regular basis, protesting for
better wages for transit workers, for a halt to governmental changes in retirement policy, and
every interest in between. In this way, the citizens provide obvious feedback about their views
on governmental action. With the rigidity of the bureaucratic system, it becomes difficult to
foster change, especially change inspired by an individual or small group of citizens. Thus,
striking and protesting is often the only productive way to get the government’s attention and
provoke or prevent change. Strikes function as an annoyance, either by damaging the image of
the government or providing a headache for the regular functioning of societal organizations.
Striking is relatively successful, if executed properly and diligently, but never guaranteed. The
practice exists as a cultural construct as a means of protest rather than a governmental standard.
French protests are often in reaction to a specific governmental action, inspired by similar
frustrations Americans might have to a governmental move. However, French culture tends to place a strong value in the strength of a centralized government while many Americans share an ideal that does not favor overt governmental intervention and power. With the empowerment offered to citizens by constitutional authority, Americans are afforded standardized influence against the government. The structured allowance for questioning and the position of the Constitution as paramount to the identity of the country creates a situation where Americans are much more resistant to governmental authority and action versus their French counterparts.

The role of the constitution and the difference of the federalist versus centralized systems create fundamental differences in the way Americans and the French establish value systems about political power and their roles in society. Americans look at the French system as rigid and overbearing, with too much government control and limited individual influence. The French see themselves as powerful and unified, with a structured and organized foundation. Conversely, the French see the American system as disjointed and weak as a result of power being decentralized and divided. Americans in turn value the local experimentation allowed by the federalist breakdown and the individual autonomy they have to prevent an overbearing government. Consequently, it seems that the French view their government as a body empowered to maintain an organized society; on the other hand, Americans view their government as a necessity that all too often infringes on their daily lives and individual pursuits. Dwight D. Eisenhower, an ex-American president himself, once said, “I think that people want peace so much that one of these days government had better get out of their way and let them have it.” Due to this divergence in views of governmental roles, France and the United States experience a lack of understanding of how to accept and function within the alternate system. This leads to a cross-national fundamental misunderstanding of institutional and cultural
practices. These factors contribute to the cultural divide between the two countries as they attempt to adhere to their own historical and sociological makeup while politically, economically, and culturally intertwining with growing regularity on a global basis.

Functioning within these divergent standardized systems are two nations with a very different cultural makeup. The United States has a history rooted in a value of rebellion and subsequent freedom from oppressive government. The formation of the country itself originated from the American Revolution, which established independence from what people at the time saw as overbearing British rule. From this, America established itself as the land of opportunity, a haven for freedom fighters and seekers of liberty. Hence, the American cultural melting pot was formed. American coins of money proudly display the saying “e pluribus unum” (out of many, one), implying the unification of a culturally wide-ranging group of citizens. The U.S., far more so than any other country, was created by and continues to be created by immigrants, welcoming people from around the world to meld together into a uniquely diverse American culture. Especially with the individual identities of fifty separate states, the United States is defined nationally as an extremely heterogeneous society.

While the U.S. is a culture of many cultures, France prides itself on the strength of its own distinct national culture. In terms of history, France has a diverse political past, being ruled by everything from kings to the Fifth Republic. But a significant portion of French culture has roots that extend deep into its long history (dating back long before the birth of the United States.) Subsequently, the enactment of the national mantra, “liberté, égalité, fraternité” (freedom, equality, brotherhood), is facilitated by the overall comparability and lack of significant variation in French cultural, racial, and ethnic makeup. France is not characterized by high rates of immigration or emigration, minimizing population changes and maintaining a
relatively homogeneous society. The centralized system allows for more national continuity of experiences and exposure. Therefore, the vast difference in U.S. and French diversity creates two uniquely functioning societies. France seems more comfortable with embracing the concept of a republic, with representatives to serve citizens and their interests. Many Americans often intently or unknowingly forget our foundation as a republic, first defining the country as a democracy, embracing the ideal of individual voice and participation.

**Political Foundation Creating Educational Foundation**

These historical and cultural value systems are passed on through the school systems, (an organization developmentally more influential than any other in society) and are at the helm of the very creation of the educational systems themselves. Societal emphasis on the value of education and changes in educational policy are ever evolving sociological constructs. But the most significant component in the makeup of the educational systems of France and the United States are their original foundations. Political frameworks always generate the structure of subsequent organizations; this is particularly true in education. Government ideologies have affected and shaped educational ideologies related to what and how students should learn, the opportunities students should be afforded, how they should navigate through the system, and what skills and outcomes are expected. It follows then that the educational systems are founded in accordance with national political and social ideology.
French Education

France has achieved a global respect for their educational system. The country has created an image of institutions with established high standards for academic achievement and a highly structured, rigorous system. Education has changed its shape many times in response to the shifts in government and power in the republics. The current system dates back to the beginning of the Fifth Republic because “what existed before then could not be termed a system, as the different types of schools were not integrated into a coherent whole” (Lutz 19). The unified system was put into place gradually through the 1960’s and 1970’s. France looks to their education system as a reflection of the cohesiveness of their society. Emphasis on structure and academic rigor are paramount. An organized web of options dictates students’ paths through the system, designed to relegate students into the different roles necessary to fit into the overall functioning society.

Under the direction of the Ministry of National Education, the educational system is divided into primary and secondary education within three levels of schools: école (the American equivalent of elementary school), collège (the middle school equivalent), and lycée (the high school equivalent). Education has been compulsory for all French children from ages six to sixteen since 1967. However, there is a very strong nursery school system that precedes this age, known as école maternelle (a manifestation of the national belief in the importance of early childhood education). This results in nearly 100% of children being placed in an école maternelle between the ages of three and five, with an additional 35% attendance rate for two year olds (Lutz 27). Primary education is divided into two cycles covering five years of schooling in the école. This is followed by college, which covers ages 11-15 and the lower level
of secondary education. Since the mid-1970’s, this educational level has remained as a mixed-ability-level of schooling, still focusing on ideals of mass education for an egalitarian purpose. The division of students based on abilities happens at the lycée level, which completes upper secondary education. In 1957, an entrance examination for the lycée was abolished, but a student is still judged on their achievement up to that point by their teachers, administrators, and parents as the basis for the determination of their subsequent attendance at a vocational, technological, or general lycée. This will affect what type of certificate the student will have attained at the end of secondary education and what type of higher education, if any, they will pursue. Thus, a student’s educational achievement during their years at collège is essentially used to determine the general direction of their continuing educational and professional career in relation to technical, professional, and vocational paths (Lutz 20).

France has seen a drastic change in its public school system versus the private school sector. The system was established in the 1880’s as “free, compulsory, and nonsectarian”. Private and parochial schools existed, but they were independently run and funded. However, with the desire to provide competition for the public schools, a number of steps were taken to ultimately receive state funding for private education as well. In 1951 a law was passed granting an annual allowance for every elementary school child. The money could go towards a public or private school. The next few years saw a rise in that allowance and an extension to include kindergarten and secondary school students. 1959 brought the passage of the Débre Act, which was passed as a nine-year initiative allowing for government expenditure for private school teachers’ salaries. The provision was extended in 1968, followed by the passage of a law in 1977 that permanently established the public and private school dichotomy, both funded by the government. Private schools have the benefit of government funding, but retain their own
control over curriculum and student acceptance and have the commonly used option of charging additional tuition money. Conversely, public schools must admit all those students in their district and must follow the rigid, national curriculum. However, private schools have not outperformed or overtaken public school as theory of competition might predict. Private schools have not materialized as academically superior, nor has attendance achieved high levels. Eighty-four percent of French students attend public school. Private schools not only have failed to provide adequate competition to raise educational standards to better prepare students, but they have succeeded in highlighting societal inequalities. Disproportionate number of native-born, white, middle and upper class French children attend private schools. Improvements in the public school system are also stalled, as private school supporters use political pull to instill a fear that public school improvements will result in the reduction of private school enrollment (Fowler 9). Therefore, the educational system as a whole does not facilitate change, remaining steadfast in its makeup as a public endeavor.

The culmination of a French student’s educational career is the baccalauréat examination (commonly referred to as the bac), taken at the completion of the lycée (usually around age eighteen.) The école and collège are meant to prepare students for the lycée, and the curriculum of the lycée is almost completely geared towards preparing for the bac. It is an exceedingly intense procedure meant to judge the ability of a student and therefore assess their potential productivity and role in society – a weeklong series of exams totaling almost twenty-four hours of testing. Any student who passes the bac is guaranteed admittance to higher education. Higher education is completely public and therefore maintained and financed by the government. Consequently, this provides a virtually cost-free education for those who prove, via the bac, that they are academically capable. The bac was created in 1808, established as the general bac, and
meant to be the first grade for higher education. In 1880, only 1% of students passed the bac. In 1936, passing grades grew to only 2.7%, and continued to expand to 20% in 1970, 36% in 1989, and 62% in 2000. In 1968, the need to expand educational opportunities to include more students was validated with the creation of the technological bac. Three years of schooling in the lycée prepare a student for the technological and general bac. There are eight different technological bacs meant to target students whose interests and abilities may be less academic in nature. Furthermore, the professional bac was created in 1985 to give even further opportunities to provide standardized degrees and better prepare students in vocational or professional training. In certain cases, it permits the continuation of studies, but in most cases is meant to serve as transitional training into active life in society. Students may attend a professional lycée for two years and prepare for a Certificate d’Aptitude professionelle (CAP) or a Brevet d’Etudes professionnelles (BEP), which serve as a less rigorous means to receive a type of standardized certification and training. One can choose to continue for two more years leading to taking the professional bac (Ministère 1). The division into the three bac examinations has resulted in the creation of the three corresponding lycées, whose curriculum is narrowly focused around teaching specifically for the particular bac.

Higher education is pursued by most students through the university system, but also is broken down to include specialized Grandes Ecoles, which offer scientific training, professorship training, or advanced business studies. Passage of the bac is also required for admittance to a Grande Ecole, viewed as the top tier of the educational system, thus requiring two additional years of preparatory classes after passage of the bac and an particularly comprehensive and competitive entrance examination process (France-education system 3). The French government funds both Grandes Ecoles and universities, thus functioning as a continuation of secondary
public education. Education is intended for all, but the privilege of higher education has
depended on performing up to the established standards of the bac. The criterion for passing the
bac has not changed over the years. The lycées have, in theory, done a better job of preparing
students for the test. Once students enter the university system, they enter a two-year cycle
called the DEUG where students choose a specialized area of study. The second cycle includes a
License and Maîtrise certification after one year of study each. The third level of university
study is a cycle for specialized research training. One channel is a one-year degree for a
professional career, DESS. The other channel leads to a diploma, DEA, as the first step towards
a doctorate program. A fourth-level program for post-doctorate certification is the final step (4).
These levels of higher education are reached with the passage of related exams, similar to the
principles of the bac examination. Therefore, student’s path through higher education at all
levels is objectively achieved based on the passage of these tests, a path that leads to a particular,
post-educational career.

The French educational system is structured in a way that makes it difficult to propagate
change or to allow in subjectivity for student assessment. The system depends on structured
exams between and within particular levels of education. Within the classroom, there is a focus
on traditional subjects of study, emphasizing basic skills and academic development rather than
social development. In higher education, the grade is typically determined by the score on a final
exam, and perhaps another mid-term exam or paper. In primary and secondary education, exams
are created that establish objective standards of achievement; if these standards are not met,
students are not promoted to the next grade. The priority is not to pass students through the
system, but rather to ensure that a student is adequately prepared at each step before they
advance. When a student is deemed to be lacking in their performance, it is a common practice
for teachers to hold students back another year. The logic is that it would be better to hold the student back so they can properly develop their skills instead of passing them along and hoping they will “catch up” to standards. In fact, one-third of French students are held back at some point in their schooling. Because this is a common practice, it becomes a more socially acceptable practice, thus alleviating much of the expected stigma. Consequently, the standards of the French educational system prove to be deeply rooted and established in their constancy. Quality egalitarian mass education is seen as valuable for the benefit of greater society, thus respecting education as a public concern and a public responsibility. This firmness in structure is consistent with the order of French society and government in general. Curriculum is designed to educate French students to live in France. Foreign students are expected to acclimate themselves to the French system. French citizens support the centralized structure in education and its public funding because they education as a public concern that benefits all of society.

**United States Education**

The United States educational system is much more fluid in relation to adaptation to social change, therefore having an extensive and varied history as the overall country has evolved. As a free democracy, the U.S. is characterized by principles of mass education with equal, open access for all children. Ages of compulsory attendance vary by each state (in the range between ages 5 through 18), since education is left to the jurisdiction of the states. National programs are often put into place to support the general expectations and visions of the schools, but tend to have a more theoretical base rather than fixed specifications. Each state sets its own curriculum and creates its own reforms, with state mandates presiding over federal
power. Thus variation exists within classrooms in different school districts - what is taught, how it is taught, and how achievement is measured. Power is dissipated from the state to local school districts as well. This allows for the protection of local interests and the facilitation of experimentation with school reform. Changes can take place on smaller scales, with the hope and intent of becoming a model for change by other states and school districts if modifications prove to be successful. Attempts by the national government to infringe on state educational power are generally looked upon unfavorably. Education is highly valued with the responsibility placed on the community it serves. Education is thus seen more as a private concern rather than a public responsibility. Education is not viewed as a public concern because current national values do not recognize education as a benefit for the national community. Education is thought of as an individual responsibility and as a benefit for a much smaller community.

Education for American children often begins with nursery school programs for children aged three to five. Nursery schools are independently run and funded, therefore attendance is voluntary and variability exists among types of institutions. There is also a wide-range in quality and goals of the institutions, with high quality daycare requiring proportionally high fees. Therefore, pre-school choice is often contingent on the availability of the child’s parental, financial resources, since it remains a private concern rather than a public responsibility. At age five, most children attend kindergarten, a level that has been added as a transitional phase between the social focus of nursery school and the scholastic focus of elementary school. Elementary schools generally consist of grades one through five. Grades six through eight, typically referred to as middle school, get grouped together as the start of secondary education. The final level of secondary education is high school, consisting generally of grades nine through twelve.
National tests exist for different grade levels, the usage of which depends on the state
government and local school districts. However, they serve merely as an assessment of students’
progress, and therefore an assessment of the productivity of the schools – functioning more as a
report card of the schools rather than a recorded grade for students. Often there exists a low
minimum standard students must achieve to move to the next grade on these standardized tests;
the scores do not count for or against individual grades. The most significant of these
standardized tests is the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), taken at the end of high school as a
vehicle to evaluate a student’s verbal and mathematical skills. It is a test taken for the purpose of
assessing a student’s academic potential in higher education. A less frequently used test serving
the same purpose is known as the ACT (American College Testing program). These tests
likewise do not count for a grade, but instead serve as a means to judge the academic abilities of
a student and serve as a factor by which colleges and universities assess the potential for students
within their institutions. The tests are a significant factor in determining entrance to higher
education, but it is up to each college or university to pass their own judgment on the weight of
each score in the decision to accept a student.

The American educational system is also characterized by a sizeable dichotomy between
public and private schools, in quality and access. Public schools are funded and directed by state
governments, while private schools are independently operated and financed. Even within the
public and private school division, there is a further breakdown of various types of institutions.
Parochial schools are independently run, religiously affiliated schools. The remaining private
schools are likewise independently run, each with their independent hiring, curriculum, and
admittance processes. As a school’s reputation and quality rises, so do the competitions for
enrollment and the price of tuition. In this way, private schools tend to be overwhelmingly
attended by children in higher socio-economic classes, thereby perpetuating social inequalities with unequal access to high-quality education. Public schools educate the majority of American children, commissioned to attend one particular school in their area, funded entirely by tax money on the local, state, and federal levels. This in no way, however, guarantees an egalitarian system. Because the majority of funding for public schools comes from equivalent levels of state and local spending, financial resources for education and therefore quality of education is highly contingent on the incomes of the particular geographic area. As a result, schools in richer suburbs often have higher quality public schools, directly proportional to higher taxes and corresponding public funding. Conversely, in many poorer cities, money is lacking and quality teachers and resources are scarce. The result is poorly educated inner-city children with self-perpetuated gaps in quality education and, therefore, achievement versus children in richer suburbs. With race linked to economic status in many cases, problems in poorly funded educational areas also becomes a problem of equal access for racial minorities.

Within the public school system, there are also specialized schools called charter schools, part of a recent phenomenon attempting to bridge some of these social inequalities. A charter school is a non-sectarian, independently managed, tuition-free public school. Any individual or group can apply to the government to open such a school, many times taking over already existing, but failing schools. They are in many ways like private schools, creating their own curriculum, often embracing new innovations in educational theory and reform. A “charter” is made outlining the missions and methodology for the school, giving the school three to five years to develop and determine if their goals have become a reality (Bx Tech 1). Students can switch between the public and private sectors of education at any point during their schooling. All types of institutions are part of the basic schooling meant for every child. Access is granted
and guaranteed for all, but “equity of quality” is by no means a reality. Government money alone cannot support the innovative missions of the schools.

At the completion of secondary education, many students move into the workforce. Since education is only required through age sixteen, many students leave the educational system without even a high school diploma. They too may enter the workforce, but the quality and pay of their job will suffer. One can also take a high school equivalency test at any stage in their life to get their GED, a diploma meant to symbolize the equivalent training of completing high school. As the economy has expanded, the necessity of having a high school diploma in order to get a quality job has increased proportionally. However, as the job market has become increasingly dependent on skilled workers, a degree in higher education has become even more increasingly necessary. Currently about 40% of high school graduates pursue some form of higher education, the highest percentage in the industrial world, according to the U.S. Embassy. After graduation from twelfth grade, an American student pursuing higher education can often plan on attending a four-year college or university. Two-year institutions, including community colleges, are also available, offering Associate degrees. Admission is often automatic, and the degree has some value over a high school degree. However, its commonly accepted value is as a gateway to a four-year degree, as such a degree has become a standard requirement for quality employment.

The typical path to higher education is direct admittance to a four-year college or university. A university is larger in size and often broken down into separate colleges with specific areas of study. Colleges can establish their own curriculum and focus for their areas of study, ranging from extreme specialization to liberal arts with a number of disciplines. Each college or university has its own distinct reputation and identity. As the competition for skilled
jobs has increased, so has the competition for students to gain acceptance into the “best” schools. Students “shop” to find the school that best suits their needs academically, socially, financially, and / or geographically. The competition for schools to attract the best students becomes intense, and schools constantly perform renovations and reforms to make the institution continually more appealing. Admittance standards vary from college to college. Student assessment often includes high school grades, SAT scores, extra-curricular activities, and individual personality and character. Factors are weighted differently for each school based on their individual assessment of what type of student they want to contribute to the culture of their institution. A single characteristic of a student is never considered as the sole basis for admittance, including SAT scores. Therefore, both objective and subjective factors impact student acceptance to higher education.

There also exists a split between private and state-run colleges and universities. Each state has one or more institutions of higher education. State-run institutions follow specific regulations set by the state in exchange for state funding. Tuition costs are much lower, especially for residents of the state. Traditionally, private schools tend to be of better quality, but this is by no means a universal standard. Certain state universities are consistently ranked among the top institutions in the country. Students’ choice of schools also depends on financial requirements. Schools are often able to grant scholarships to students with financial need or high academic achievement. This is significant since better reputation normally justifies higher tuition. And better scholastic reputation frequently enhances the desirability of a graduate on a job application. In effect, the American system of higher education is increasingly competitive and highly varied both in substance and in value. Performance in secondary schooling, coupled with financial capability and social clout, will affect what institution a student is able to attend,
which will in turn affect the quality of their education and their ability to pursue particular employment.

In choosing a college, students are also able to choose their major area of study. Depending on the school, this major may need to be selected beginning with the entrance application or may be delayed up to a few years, with varying requirements for courses within and outside the major. Although varying degrees of difficulty exist in doing so, it is generally accepted that any student can change their major if their interests change. A student’s major area of study has a significant impact on what types of careers they are likely able to pursue. A degree in business is not necessarily a mandate for assuming a career in business, but this type of degree makes such a career much more likely. The number of college graduates has been on a sharp and steady increase in recent decades, therefore creating more competition for jobs with high salaries. In turn, students feel increasingly inclined to choose a major dictated more by the job market and availability of jobs rather than their own specific academic interests. In a 1997 speech, the U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, addressed the recent merging of the once distinct worlds of school and work. Due to our industrial economy, in the 1950’s, 60% of jobs were considered unskilled. Evolving into 1997 with shifts in the labor market within the demands of the information age, the percentage of unskilled jobs had dropped to 20%. Riley stated, “a better standard of living depends upon an educated, skilled, and competent citizenry” (Riley 1). Thus changes in the labor marker necessitated changes in educational training. Because of the changes in the job market, high paying salaries are maintained in skilled jobs in sectors related to industries such as business, sciences, and computers. Students are free to choose whichever career path they desire. The American cultural ideal of freedom of opportunity also comes into play here, with the belief that many learned skills can be carried
across sectors, and career changes are accepted and routine for many people as they embrace the freedom for individual opportunity.

The American educational system is characterized by variance. With educational power largely left out of the hands of the national government, there are large gaps in quality and achievement across states and school districts. The variance allows for a greater fluidity and opportunity for change and experimentation, but also contributes to the perpetuation of consistent social inequalities. The dissipation of power across levels allows for the protection of local interests and the individualization of opportunity. However, true egalitarian mass education is not a reality, as access to quality education is unequal across socio-economic class. Since education is a local responsibility, schools are left with local resources to function within their environment. In an attempt to keep children in school, many institutions, especially urban ones, lower standards for passing achievement in order to pass students through to the next grade. The phenomenon of the “dumbing down of America” often results in a decreased emphasis on the honing of staple academic skills, with education expanding to prepare students to live amidst what is the social reality of their particular environment. Because a premium is placed on staying in school and failure rates reflect negatively on the school, many students end up passing to the next grade without being properly prepared. Therefore, students who lack basic skills move forward before they are ready. It follows then that students who lack access to quality education are caught at the bottom of the spectrum of achievement, with a large void between them and the often high-achieving students who have access to quality education at private schools and wealthy public schools. Therefore, the American educational system has both very high-achieving and very low-achieving students. The system is characterized by
freedom of opportunity, but individuals must find their way within the framework governed by social barriers that must be broken down.

-----------------------------French vs. American Educational Ideology-----------------------------

**Education vs. Schooling Paradigm**

An article in *Education* magazine in 2003 named two distinct approaches to judging the vision for frameworks of how to teach students, the *educational paradigm* and the *schooling paradigm*. The two frameworks encompass two different ways to assess student intelligence and nurture student talents. The framework subsequently addresses two different ways to teach children and therefore two different goals for whose needs should be served – individual or societal. The two approaches embrace different ideas for what is valued in a student and therefore what a student’s ultimate role in society should be. Society’s value system addresses this balance between the desire to serve the individual needs of students and the necessity to also serve the needs of society (Shantz).

The *schooling paradigm* addresses a framework within which schools teach students to function to serve the demands of society. It indicates a way of educating children that initially determines the skilled parts of students and emphasizes the development of those particular skills. It is a regimented way to judge student’s intelligence to determine aptitude and subsequently expand on specific talents to train them how to best contribute to society. It would value a certain type of standardized intelligence. The *schooling paradigm* would relate to a structured society, aware of the roles it needs to fill in order for the society to function on a basic
daily level as well as to contribute to a hopefully continually developing economy, culture, and technology. Education here would be a means to train children to grow into citizens that will be able to find their own particular path of development within this scheme. This is done through a structured curriculum often characterized by assessing student performance based on standardized tests. A premium is placed on the direct acquisition and reproduction of standardized and accepted knowledge. This would then lead to an emphasized focus on developing the potentially most fruitful talents of a student so as to ensure they are well versed in a particular area of expertise, equipped with a specific knowledge base and with education as the means to prepare students for a specific end. Education in this framework has regimented roles and expectations.

Conversely, the *educational paradigm* consists of teaching students to develop based on their individual needs and talents. This approach would focus on affording students the opportunity to develop and grow as best suits them and their individual goals. It would recognize that society has necessary roles to fill, but does not recognize the value in limiting students to a particular path as a means to address this need. No one particular type of knowledge is valued. Instead schools have a greater recognition of the theory of multiple intelligences, meaning students can be deemed intelligent in a number of different capacities and therefore are receptive to different ways of presenting and learning material. As a result, the need to distribute and assess knowledge in different ways would subsequently be respected. This type of schooling would allow students to nurture different intelligence and talents in accordance with theories of multiple-intelligence. Howard Gardner introduced this theory to include eight types of intelligence – linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Logically, schools would place a higher value on
more academically related intelligences, but would recognize the importance of all and would
directly or indirectly address the development of all types in students.

The *educational paradigm* serves to find the different potentials in each student and
therefore work to serve individual needs. It follows that students within this framework would
develop to be moderately well versed in a number of areas, rather than grow to be an expert in
one specific area. A student within the framework of the *educational paradigm* has increased
freedom for individual influence over their own educational experience and therefore each
student would have their own unique educational path. This template coincides with the belief
that education does not come directly from a book, that it should and does go beyond time spent
within a classroom and continues long after one has stopped attending school. Within this
paradigm, well-rounded citizens are valued, and education becomes a means of enlightenment to
develop students to become educated for their own inherent good, not necessarily to be educated
only for the goal of securing a specifically crafted job.

**Educational Expectations for Preparation**

The educational system of a developed democratic nation produces students to fit into the
greater society. In schools, students are meant to learn how to be informed citizens and be able
to contribute to the democratic process (i.e. voting and other community participation).
Education centers on democracy in order to teach students the skills to live in and contribute to
society. It involves a socialization process for the social and academic development of students.
It is the aim of education to train students to retain and carry over these skills to the labor market
for practical job use. It is assumed that students will graduate from secondary or higher
education with varying skills, due to their unique experiences and successes in school, their
natural intelligence, and the social and academic support from outside the classroom (family, social status, etc.) Education in a democracy is characterized by a goal of egalitarian education for all – the expectation that all students will graduate from secondary school, at a minimum, with a quality education and a readiness to seek out and secure a good job. However, society is not completely made up of these “good” jobs. In order for a developed country to continue to prosper economically and technologically, it must ensure that leadership positions are meaningfully fulfilled and professionals such as medical researchers, scientists, teachers, and business leaders are produced and able to make contributions for social and technological advancements. In addition, a society needs to fill necessary positions in unskilled labor to ensure that society can function on a daily basis. Each town or city needs people to fill all roles, including bus drivers, trash collectors, and janitors for the efficient, daily functioning of all aspects of society. These are obviously not highly desirable jobs and are usually occupied by people who did not complete school or do not have a strong educational background, but are essential jobs nonetheless.

A person’s success in their employment is highly contingent upon their successes in their schooling. It is expected that those who succeed in schools with higher quality education and training will graduate to the best jobs. Thus schools serve as the suppliers of workers, serving as the intermediary to help relegate students to their societal roles. It follows then that education would be closely tied to sociological and economic trends related to the development of the labor market. The educational system of a given society is the most significant organization in relation to socialization of children. (Since education is compulsory in the United States and France, this socialization is meant as a shared experience for everyone.) This process will greatly influence how students are prepared for and will contribute to society. However, because of the societal
effects on organizations and individuals, schools are consequently expected to adapt to the changing norms and demands of society at large. As the labor market has changed, schools are expected to be able to produce workers to fill the changing roles created by changing economic demands.

**Shifts In Socio-Economic Demands**

In 1980, Alvin Toffler classified the breakdown of sociological eras into three waves – the first wave as agricultural, the second as industrial, and the current third wave as synthesis. He asserted that the mindsets of society in the different waves were reflected in the social institutions, including schools. The foundations of the current school systems in France and the United States originated within the era of the industrial revolution. Therefore, the original structure and content of education was rooted by the mindset of the industrial era and was therefore established with the goal of producing workers for a mass labor market. The industrial economy depended heavily on “the preparation of students for specialized jobs within a mass-production market” with a demand placed on “quantified detail without context”. The purpose of education in this environment would be to identify the most productive parts of individuals and train these specific parts in a way that will best prepare them to fit within the labor market demands of greater society. Work in this era is characterized by manufacturing work with individuals as components of a structured hierarchy. This type of work places an emphasis on specific standardized knowledge and skills learned in schools. “The influence of industry on the schooling system is evident in standardized curricula, intelligence tests, grading policies, admission procedures, and accreditation rules, all to the end of preparing youth for the ‘massified’ job market of standardized industry” (Shantz 4).
The mid-twentieth century in the second (industrial) wave functioned well in relation to the operation of the schools, as the goals of education coincided with the needs of industry. Hence, schools in this era functioned within the *schooling paradigm*, characterized by the need for students to be trained for mass production in a standardized market. The ideals of this paradigm coincided with the cultural value at the time that expected education to prepare students for this type of work. However, as the twentieth century came to a close, the era of the third wave began to materialize as a new era, and the information age began to take root. This new era created a completely innovative labor market, with emphasis placed on new information and new technology that would advance new ways of thinking and new ways of serving people. “Information work”, instigated by radical advancements in technology, established new demands for creativity and new and various skills. Therefore, with the emergence of this modern era where mass production is no longer dominant, the demand on the school systems to function within the *schooling paradigm* lessens. The need for standardized knowledge and training for mass labor begins to be taken over by the need for original thinking and education for wide-ranging careers. Thus new demands were placed on the established frameworks of school systems. At this crossroads, the *educational paradigm* begins to take shape and increase in its relevancy. A diverse labor market with an increasing quantity of nonstandard jobs characterizes the “information age”. It follows then that an overly standardized school curriculum would not educate children in a way conducive to the necessities of greater society in this era. Therefore, the challenge arises with reconciling the reality of the existing paradigm and the emergence of another. Because the modern school systems of the nations originated and therefore established their foundations during the times of the industrial era, the mass production demands of the labor marker had a significant impact on schools original formation. The *schooling paradigm* was
therefore launched with the original establishment of modern school systems in the industrial era, whereas the *educational paradigm* emerged only as a framework formulated as comparable to the new demands of the information age. The United States and France struggle in different ways to address this conflict. The ways in which the two countries choose to deal with this challenge is rooted in their original political and social makeup. The efforts of both countries must address the conflict with divergent cultural value systems and the variance in cultural makeup and homogeneity of the two groups of citizens.

Contemporary French society is more likely to be characterized by value systems that will be consistent with ideologies of the schooling paradigm, whereas in the United States, contemporary cultural value systems would tend to coincide more with the educational paradigm philosophies. French culture places a higher premium on order and standardization growing from their centralized political foundation and the greater homogeneity of their society. Therefore, in France, structured education is valued and an emphasis is placed on expertise training. Conversely, United States culture tends to place their premium on individualization and variety, a value born out of federalist political foundation minimizing governmental power and the melting pot of culture that characterizes society. In this respect, the United States values well-rounded students and freedom and flexibility in educational experience. Thus the United States and France at their core have shared a similar problem of how to transform education in a way that will address the shift in labor market demands within the emerging information age, but they are functioning within two very different cultural frameworks with opposing social value systems and a highly variant population. Therefore, despite the existence of a shared fundamental goal in egalitarian, democratic education, France and the United States have and
will continue to have divergent, evolving school systems that will need to address emerging conflicts in distinct ways.

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Equity in Democratic Education
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United States Struggle For Equality In Education

The current reality of French and American education does not entirely match the current cultural value systems previously explained and the demands of national and global society. The United States places value in variety and experimentation as a means for development and improvement. As the global melting pot of diversity, there is increased pressure for an emphasis on multi-cultural education and adaptation for the varied backgrounds and abilities of all students. This includes an expanded curriculum to take some focus away from the basics to include cultural education deemed necessary for living in a multi-cultural American society. The United States also depends heavily on private education for the production of its top students (ignoring for a moment the inherent social advantages many of these students already have). Because private schools have the freedom to educate based on their own standards and preferences, they are better able to function freely and innovatively within a framework demanded by the educational paradigm. Magnet and charter schools within the public school system strive for this same purpose. However, the U.S. cannot avoid addressing the reality that a division of labor into skilled and unskilled jobs is still a necessity in order for society to function. Democratic education is said to be egalitarian for everyone. Within this principle, it should follow that a quality education for all should result in equal opportunity for all in the workforce. However, in no way does this principle manifest itself in practice. Increased wealth affords
increased advantages for access to private and better quality public education. Because of the freedom granted to private schools (with their higher tuition costs) and the additional quality resources available to wealthy public school districts, the existence of access to education for all children does not imply equal quality education for all.

Recognizing that social inequalities directly influence a student’s preparation and development before, during, and after formal schooling, education does not turn out to be equal for everyone. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital speaks to the example of disparity of social savoir-faire between socio-economic classes. Higher socio-economic class affords cultural training more conducive to achievements in school. Bourdieu’s cultural capital refers to the sum of all our social and cultural experiences, such as language, dress, activities, and relationships. Higher class predicts things such as well-educated parents, exposure to cultural activities, and “standard English” spoken at home. These experiences all correspond to the types of knowledge and training valued in schools, thus preparing young children with a higher likelihood of school success. Therefore, social experience outside of the school greatly influences students’ ability to succeed within schools.

Even if education proved to be egalitarian for all, equal opportunity in the labor market is still not a guarantee. Everyone cannot become a doctor or a lawyer; someone has to be the cafeteria worker and someone else the janitor. This is not to say that all those in unskilled labor positions would not be capable of skilled labor if job opportunities were unlimited and proper training was available. However, one must account for the fact that some people will inherently lack the mental capacity to become proficient with required skills, but there are many more people who are limited in their advancement within the labor market due to pervasive social inequalities. The standard of living in the United States is the highest in the world, but wealth is
also very concentrated. Citizens range from very poor to very rich. Therefore large gaps in social equality emerge. There is a huge disparity in quality of education in private versus public schools, as well as an often-greater division between the quality of inner-city education versus that of more affluent suburban communities. There is a ceiling on the level to which the nation is willing and able to address inequalities in education. Even if the United States is able to address the sizeable gap in the quality of educational resources due to gaps in wealth, in current society the nation still needs to relegate a certain number of people to positions of unskilled labor and therefore benefits to a certain extent of these workers emerging from gaps in education.

It is in the best interest of the people to educate all children to contribute to democratic society. However, a certain amount of unskilled labor will always be needed. Even if every American child received high-quality education, there will still be unskilled labor roles that must be filled. Because of persistent social inequalities, lower class citizens and racial minorities are often relegated to these positions. Therefore, the national motto defining the “American dream”, where accomplishments are mandated by one’s own dedication and motivation to succeed does not become reality for everyone. This cultural ideal, coupled with Horatio Alger success stories of those who climbed the socio-economic ladder, create an expectation for Americans that anyone can be successful in the skilled labor market if they work hard enough. In this framework, the responsibility is put on the individual and based on equal freedom granted to all citizens. Theoretically, it becomes the individuals’ own fault if they fail to succeed. Therefore, for the under-privileged, the American Dream is replaced by the American reality that not everyone can become rich and famous. Thus, the American highly competitive environment proves fruitful for the privileged and contributes to new advancements and increased economic
power, but proves unfavorable for the under-privileged and results in the perpetuation of social inequalities and the despair of individuals striving to climb the social ladder in vain.

**French Efforts Towards Egalitarian Education**

In contrast, France places value in structured control and disciplined order as a more effective means of development. As a largely homogeneous community with extensive history and rich culture, there is greater attachment to national identity and pride and collective experience. French society’s centralized organization allows for greater crossover of experience and understanding and therefore has a greater compatibility with the educational system’s regimented operation. A greater worth is given to high skill and proficiency in a particular area. Education is placed at the forefront of public concerns, recognizing the importance of proper training for the benefit of all society. The country governs the educational system by national standards and curriculum, ensuring that all students of a particular grade are learning the same things on the same day. The system is governed by unwavering standards that hold expectations high for its students. Achievement by all students becomes a priority. Because high standards are a reality and the public believes in education as valuable to every citizen, the structured system works best.

French society does not share in the same level of heterogeneity as their American counterpart. Subsequently, they do not have to deal with the same level of social inequality. There is a decreased range of socio-economic class that leads to less of a social disparity and disadvantage caused by cultural capital. This results in an increasingly equal preparation and socialization before children enter school, and creates a more uniform starting point from which
children can begin to learn. In France, a greater level of homogeneity also exists racially and ethnically, and the country does not retain the same difficult history of racial discrimination and racial inequality that pervades American society and American schools. The principal reason why the French educational system does not have social inequality within its schools is due to the equal access to education for all students. The system is entirely public, financed and operated by the national government. Therefore, a continuity of quality and opportunity exists nationally. There is a small contingent of private schools, but they operate under a certain amount of governmental control and educate a small percentage of French schoolchildren. In addition, because the public schools are financed by the national government, there is not a disparity in wealth and quality of resources within the schools. Regional residency does not play a prominent factor in French educational quality as it does so frequently in the United States. Therefore, true egalitarian education is much more of a possibility in France.

Due to the absence of invasive social inequalities both within and outside of the French educational system, the responsibility is placed on the individual to achieve within the system. Because regulations remain firm, it is up to the individual to meet them. If a student is held back a year, the sole reason is because they did not perform up to the necessary standards. Since assessment within French schools is governed by tests on the curriculum, subjectivity on student achievement is rare. A specific type of intelligence is valued and cultivated. This type of knowledge is measured through standardized tests, thereby allowing for a direct, objective judgment of student performance. If a student fails to succeed within this system, they are accountable to themselves and their own failure – their own lack of intelligence or effort. It is not the fault of social inequality or subjectivity. Since student achievement shapes the path students will follow once they complete their highest level of schooling, that path becomes the
exclusive creation of the student’s ability to perform up to standards. A less favorable career or social position is thus more likely to be the result of personal shortcoming rather than societal influence.

**France vs. United States – Educational Adaptability**

Because French organizations are so well regulated, social outcomes become more readily expected and accepted. The cultural inclination in the United States towards a desire to avoid complacency is replaced in France by cultural acceptance of social reality and personal positioning. This breeds a certain amount of pessimism when one is governed by an over-acceptance of social outcomes that stifles motivation to challenge traditional establishments and practices to evolve. In France, one does not tend to consider a career change as an option. Workers are trained thoroughly for their particular trade, and they are meant to follow through with that course. A career change is not considered an option, nor does the option ever tend to enter students’ minds. This way of thinking coincides with an overall acceptance of authority that dominates France. Rules and regulations are thought to be there for a reason and in the best interest of the public, and therefore should not be broken. The French often view the American practice of questioning power and the bending/breaking of rules as disrespectful of authority. Therefore, French society tends to support a culture of acceptance, facilitated by a more strictly regulated society and a society less ruled by social inequality that allows for more egalitarian education and personal accountability.

French and American society and conventional culture has significantly different reactions to the *schooling* and *educational paradigms*. Both countries historically started functioning within the *schooling paradigm*, based on the origination of the modern school
systems during the industrial revolution. In this second wave era, *schooling paradigm* ideology corresponded well with the need for mass production of industrial workers. Standardized tests and curriculum with regimented structure allowed schools in both countries to train students for the particular labor market of the time. As the industrial era evolved into the information age, the demands of the labor market began to change, and therefore the changing needs of greater society initiated the need for changes within educational training. The new needs of the labor market emerging in the information age began to call for new ways of thinking and doing things, and therefore necessitated the exploration of multiple forms of intelligence and a more varied curriculum. The United States and France struggled with this transition in their educational systems – the U.S. struggle due to national diversity and heterogeneity of experience, the French struggle due to their foundation in centralized governmental control and a culture of consistency.

The United States has transitioned more easily from the *schooling paradigm* ideology to that of the *educational paradigm*. Increased wealth led to increased opportunity for those who enjoyed the resources. Due to the federalist breakdown of government and the tremendous value given to the individual independence granted by the Federal Constitution, a value system shirking oppression by governmental control and focusing on individual autonomy and opportunity arose. Structure and regulation tend not to be looked upon favorably, allowing for individual initiative to instigate action. Education is looked upon as a means by which an individual can act to determine their own fate. There is a collective acknowledgment of the value of education, but it is thought of as an individual endeavor. In this way, the public does not tend to focus on the overall social benefits produced by egalitarian education for all children. For those in economic positions that cause increased pressure on job attainment, education is by default valued as a way to achieve individual advancement and training for a career, rather than
acknowledged for its intrinsic value. Those who have economic stability and therefore increased opportunity, educational opportunities for individualization and experimentation are facilitated. The wide range of school choices including public, private, parochial, and charter, allows for different opportunities for childhood education. The abundance of school types allows for increased variation in instruction, which in turn fosters a greater degree of competition. The competition theoretically allows for more variety and greater quality in educational curriculum. American colleges and universities function significantly more within the educational paradigm based on this framework of competition and therefore a necessity to adapt to changing student needs and demands. Higher education in the United States has evolved into an intense competition for admission to top-quality schools. Acceptance is based on factors beyond academic performance, taking into account things such as extra-curricular activities, personality, diversity, and alumni connections – acknowledging the desirability of the “well-rounded” student. Because colleges also operate like businesses, they are forced to adapt to the needs of students to succeed in the competitive battle for the “best students.” With freedom of operation, American colleges and universities are able to and forced to adapt to those ideologies of the schooling paradigm that call for the intentioned development of individual students.

However, social inequalities within the educational system have prevented the United States from making a full transition to operating within the educational paradigm. True egalitarian education in the United States is not a reality, due to the increased cultural preparation and access to top quality private and public schools that is propagated by the significant gaps in wealth across socio-economic class. Those left out of the privileged class have legal freedom to prosper equally as well as anyone, but social freedom is a much harder thing to acquire and a force too strong for most to conquer. Therefore, many of the under-privileged start their formal
education at a disadvantage due to their preparation before school and their initial enrollment options; they are never able to work their way out of their disadvantaged beginnings. Also, society still needs to fill the required proportion of unskilled labor positions. Those not sufficiently educated and not fortunate enough to be afforded a financial path to progress are relegated to these positions – an all too often predetermined fate. It is still in the best interest of greater society to provide a minimum level of education for these workers to ensure they are properly trained to perform their job tasks and contribute to a democratic society. Sadly, poor quality schools struggling to keep students in school function as self-perpetuating based on the interests of society. By keeping children in school, they hope to ensure the child is socialized well enough to function in the workforce and become disciplined, lawful citizens. Therefore, the victims of social inequality in America are left to function within the schooling paradigm, while those with financial access to quality education have more freedom to function within the educational paradigm.

While the United States has made a partial transition into the educational paradigm, France chooses order over individuality within its structured school system. The French school system makes it difficult to convert to the new obligations of the information age. It is difficult to instigate change amidst the established order. Due to the centralized bureaucracy that governs France, political and social continuity remain the norm. Cultural acceptance of governmental authority emanates from faithfulness to the republic. Government influence is accepted, national allegiance prospers, and national collectivity and educational “sameness” remains the norm. Because education is completely controlled by the state, inequalities based on access to quality education are not a factor of student success. Comparable quality exists across all schools, so a student can expect to be properly educated regardless of where they live or their family’s social
status. Because wealth is not as isolated as within the United States, there is a smaller range in socio-economic class and therefore cultural capital, thus resulting in a greater likelihood of relatively equal social pre-school preparation. By establishing pre-school as a public endeavor, the country establishes child development as a national concern and ensures a more egalitarian mechanism for school preparation.

Standardized knowledge is expected from each child. Curriculum is taught for specific tests to ensure that students have retained the obligatory information, and that all children are learning the same information. Consistency and regularity are culturally valued. In France, higher education serves as a continuation of this process within primary and secondary schools. Because higher education is financed by public funds and controlled by governmental mandate, university education functions as a smooth continuation of previous levels within the school system. There is no competition among students for admittance to a university because acceptance is based solely on the score of the bac examination. It is a competition against oneself; if one passes the test, admittance to any university in the country is guaranteed. Therefore, the demonstration of standardized knowledge serves as the gatekeeper for French education. Higher education operates as the means to further focus one’s area of study so as to become specialized in that area. This ordered structure makes it easy for an individual to understand what is expected of them. Consequently, individual success is based on one’s own ability to perform up to established academic standards.

France, therefore, has a foundation deeply rooted in the ideology of the schooling paradigm. French education functions quite well within the regulations of the school system and the cultural values of the country as a centralized nation. Because the national government mandates education, decisions affect the entire country at once and must be adequate for
everyone. This arrangement is assisted by the generally shared cultural and social experiences of the majority of citizens. Due to this widespread effect, feasible experimentation with educational practices is generally not a possibility. Because of the great numbers impacted by change and the difficulty to alter bureaucratic establishments, variation within the educational system does not come easy or often. French society embraces its nation as a republic with officials in place to represent their interests. Society is set up in a way that allows free access and opportunity for individuals, but the structure ultimately creates a system that trains the individual to serve society by being educated to fit into a particular role and mold. The possibility for career change is not even a blip on the French student’s mental radar; students are educated to remain with a particular profession determined at an early age. Therefore, it is much more difficult for an individual to fashion their own opportunities and tailor their education to meet individual needs. Education is looked upon as the means to an end, rather than an end in itself. This order does not coincide with the ideology of the educational paradigm, allowing for individual accountability and variation in experience. The rigidity makes it difficult for France to truly adapt to change and international influence by embracing the innovation of the new information age.

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Conclusion---------------------------------

France and the United States have opposing cultural value systems affecting education, emanating from sharply divergent political foundations and divisions of power. While both democratic in political ideology, and historically international allies, the two countries have established their organizations with principles that foster opposing views about the relationship between the individual and society. These opposing views emerge on issues related to the role of government, public versus private sector responsibilities, and the nature of expectations for
individual autonomy and control. All of these factors make international understanding difficult. Both countries are by definition democratic republics, but American culture clutches to the characterization as a democracy while France is satisfied with a focus on its republic roots. France’s increased homogeneity of culture eases the effort for equity and allows a stronger national commitment; matters such as education viewed as private by American citizens tend to be French public concerns. The United States has an inordinately variant number of cultural interests to protect, which leads to an inevitable perpetuation of inequity as the competitive nature of “every man for himself” takes charge. France is a national community; the United States, the land of individual freedom of opportunity. The ideals of individual autonomy in the United States and unified national order in France are manifested within the respective educational systems. Citizens produced by the educational system are trained to fill the labor market. The two nations thus have different frameworks within which they address the changes in labor market demands due to the shift from the industrial to the information age.

Both France and the United States were founded during the industrial era with practices consistent with the *schooling paradigm* and a need to train students to fit the needs of that society. Transitioning to the demands of the information era required adaptability to new information and individualized approaches. Ideals consistent with this age are more consistent with cultural values in the United States, with increased power in the hands of the individual. However, due to American education’s social status as a private concern, inequities in schools are a stark reality; educational “success” is available only to those with financial and social access to “quality” education. In France, education is strongly respected as a national concern, with an established linear order of training and advancement from education through the labor market. The French system is successful at providing equitable mass education but leaves little
room for change and development. Thus, the educational systems serve as reflections of French and American cultural value systems, which are products of historically-founded social and political ideals. The educational systems are crucial for the development of society in response to a changing world. “School is slowly becoming the only institution capable of preserving social cohesion, of structuring (and not merely adapting to) its environment, of cushioning the effects of rapid economic and social change as a result of the increased pace of technological change and even keener international competition” (Lutz 39). The role of the school system depends heavily on the founding principles of the nations and the ensuing cultural value systems. The successes and complications of the educational systems must be viewed within this perspective, and must be addressed with respect to the cultural ideals and social frameworks of the nations.
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