

Unraveling the Complexities of Children's Vacation Time: A Window on Social Inequalities in France

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Introduction

The school vacation calendar and the use of children's vacation time are surprisingly not included in the public debate and political agenda regarding education in France. However, vacations are not just leisure time; they are also a time for learning, which directly affects children's social and academic success. Despite occasional targeted actions and limited reactions from parliamentarians, this period escapes political scrutiny despite being occupied by diversified and competitive tourism and leisure markets. The shift from the moralizing discourse of the early twentieth century to the dominance of the leisure business highlights the relative irrelevance of public authorities.

Differentiated Social Uses of Time

This indifference to children's vacation time is underlined by the statistical policies pursued on vacations since the 1990s. From 1956 to 1995, INSEE conducted a twice-yearly survey focusing solely on adult vacations. Since then, the question of "vacations" has only been the subject of two additional surveys by the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) in 1999 and 2006. This question is the subject of occasional surveys, not specifically about vacations. This shortcoming in public statistics has been partially compensated for by associations such as the Observatory of Children and Youths Holidays and Leisure (OVLEJ) since 1999. It is as if the challenges of understanding vacation practices and legitimate social representations of the use of this social time were left to the mobilization of associations and firms with divergent interests. Despite being a prominent political and social issue regarding economic and social inequalities, vacation time remains in the shadows: vacation time is often not addressed in politics and policies.

The well-known inequalities in vacation departure rates for adults and children, with departure rates of 55% to 60% per year for adults and one child in ten unable to afford a vacation in 2021 (INSEE 2023), mask more significant disparities between socioeconomic groups. For example, managers and higher intellectual professionals' children go on holiday three times more often than blue-collar workers and six times more often abroad (Cousin & Réau 2016). These disparities increase with social and economic status. To understand the social uses of this specific time, it is not enough to dichotomize vacations (those who go and those who do not). Numerous and diversified vacation formulas characterize the vacations of the children of executives and higher intellectual professions.

In contrast, the children of blue-collar workers are less likely to go on vacation, centered on one departure or no departure at all. The social uses of these times can vary. One example is the intensive use of free time in educating upper-class children through the multiplication, diversity, and strategic implementation of activities (Cousin & Réau 2016; Denord, Palme & Réau 2020). This time, far from being left vacant, is fully invested. It is linked to other social, academic, and extracurricular activities. It, therefore, seems somewhat pointless to artificially separate social times when they respond to, combine, and complement each other. Beyond suspending social

fractures, vacations prolong and no doubt reinforce them. Social relations and forms of social distinction are not suspended for a summer or a week's holiday (Bruno & Salle 2018; Wagner 2007).

Continuity of Social Times

Bernard Lahire (2019) emphasizes social continuity, regardless of the activities considered. Nevertheless, how does social variation in the use of time contribute to the reproduction of inequalities? Vacation leisure practices are commonly associated with "specialized (rather than general), secondary (rather than primary), and ordinary (rather than noble) practices or skills" (Lahire 2019, 40). However, this "secondary nature" of vacation leisure practices says very little about their role in children's socialization. While many pedagogies draw heavily on play to improve the transmission of knowledge (for instance, Pedagogy of Play, Harvard) how can we consider leisure activities as part of the socialization process? What role do these "secondary" activities play in acquiring "knowledge" and "practice" remains unresolved? Indeed, it is not so much the practice of archery or a card game that matters but the social context in which these practices occur and the associated soft skills, such as autonomy, relational skills, or the ability to do things together (e.g., OVLEJ 2016). We need more precise research on this subject.

It is partly because vacation time is associated with leisure practices that it is not seen as an essential element in the reproduction of social inequalities. However, the fungibility of activities and social time in the upper social classes and the totalizing aspect of education (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot 1997) call into question the simplistic idea of a fixed hierarchy of central and secondary skills. Rather than proceeding with such a classification, it seems more relevant to study how practices accumulate and articulate in the transmission of social dispositions, based on the principle that it is indeed the variety of ways in which skills are transmitted, coupled with their repetition, that contributes to the acquisition of specific skills. Skill-building is relational; learning in one setting can help generate "primary" skills and proficiency in another. Furthermore, it is perhaps these specific skills that make the hierarchical differences. For instance, acquiring sporting, cultural, and linguistic skills, know-how and interpersonal skills through travel, or social skills through group vacations are all "specific" skills that reinforce general skills such as self-esteem, leadership, and the ability to communicate with others.

School reproduces social inequalities through a game of adequacy and inadequacy that varies according to social class. Considering leisure activities during and outside the vacations as "secondary" skills obscures the social functions of these socially differentiated practices in the socialization process of children according to their class affiliation. These secondary skills are derived from secondary activities, while not primary in the hierarchical social valorization of skills. They play a part in acquiring primary skills by diversifying and multiplying the modes of transmission they offer to those who can benefit from them. Distinctively and part of the global education of young elites, they play a part in social reproduction and class inequalities (Lareau 2011; Khan 2011; Sherman 2017; Bruno & Salle 2018).

Conclusion: Towards New Research on Children's Free Time

Children's vacations, characterized by their recurrence and the diversity of their socialization channels, are intimately linked to their other social periods. While it can be a privileged time for

developing specialized knowledge and know-how, the crucial question remains: Do they contribute to acquiring "primary" knowledge, which lies at the heart of inequalities and social hierarchies in our society? To answer this question, we must encourage research into children's free time, recognizing the complex relationship between seemingly secondary skills and the broader process of social reproduction and class inequalities.

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