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ABSTRACT

Research about home educators is often limited by a reliance on convenience-based samples. This paper explores an alternative source of information: written reports from inquiries held by the French public administration on every registered home-educated child. First, I depict how these inquiries are legally designed and how our research team has negotiated with government agencies to gain access to these reports. Then I discuss the case study of Cheny, a city located in the working-class suburbs of Paris. In Cheny, 70 children from 44 families were registered as home educated from 2011 to 2016. I use the city records to describe what the local authorities know and think about families who home educate their children and what this knowledge teaches us about the practice and public regulation of home education in France. I focus on the ability of these reports to provide us with information about parental motives. I also raise different questions about the value and weaknesses of such sets of data.

Although it remains very exceptional, home education is clearly growing in France (Glasman & Bongrand, 2018). Between 2008 and 2015, the number of children aged 6 to 16 who were officially registered as home educated rose from 13,547 (0.13 % of the school-aged population) to 24,878 (0.3 %) (French Ministry of Education, 2016b). In order to monitor the demographic backgrounds and the contemporary motivations of the families who are part of this development, the centralized French State mainly provides aggregated and broad figures that do not catch more local meanings and patterns of home education. This lack of understanding makes it possible for the State or for the press to put forth tenuous assumptions such as the idea that the rise of home education is being prompted by Muslim sectarians. Another stereotype currently in circulation considers home educators as mainly upper middle-class parents who see home education as a good way to foster their children's interests. Assertions like these seem to be frequent these days (Kammerer, 2017).

Going beyond these stereotypes is difficult because there is no serious exhaustive or representative data available. Our knowledge about parental motives for home educating in France relies mainly on the particular examples offered by guides and testimonies (Bongrand & Glasman, 2018). Although these home educators' books or blogs are well informed and indeed informative, their representativeness is dubious. They may overstate their authors' views and knowledge on home education, whereas it can be taken for granted that home educators are extremely diverse. There is at the moment almost no scholarly research solving the problem of representativeness. The only two French academic publications are based on convenience or indeterminate samples (Guigue & Sirmons, 2015; Quatrevaux, 2011). Home-education research worldwide faces this problem (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). In the academic research group that I coordinate at the University of Paris Seine Cergy-Pontoise, we are trying to overcome this obstacle by negotiating access to public

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data. In France, registration is mandatory for any home-educated child between ages 6 and 16: unregistered home education aside, public records are theoretically exhaustive. To set up working relationships with public administrations at national and local levels, we offered independent, academically rigorous studies in exchange for access to administrative data (which would also, of course, remain respectful of families' privacy). This paper deals with one of the various attempts currently in progress within this collective research project.

In this paper, I investigate home education at a very local geographical level, which makes it truly possible to contextualize the profiles of all home-educating families within the urban dynamics in which they are embedded. I have been granted access to the 50 files that a municipal council, located in the Parisian suburbs, collected regarding 70 registered home-educated children, from 44 families, living within its borders from 2011 to 2016. Using these files, I describe what the local authorities know and think about these families, and what this knowledge reveals about home education and about its public regulation. Beforehand, I underline the interests and limitations of such an investigation based on public records.

The legal and policy context of homeschooling in France

In this first section, I summarize the French legal framework surrounding home education to describe the context in which government data about homeschooling is collected. This is the data that I will analyze in subsequent sections of this article.

Legal records as research data

In France, every child between between ages 6[1] and 16 must be educated through public schooling, private schooling, or home education (*instruction dans la famille*). Parents opting for the third choice must immediately file two notices of intent to home educate. Instituted by a law in 1882, the first notice is to be sent to the city council of the family's place of residence. The other, added in 1998, is to be sent to the local representative of the French Ministry of Education (*Inspection Académique*). Currently, these two notifications must be renewed every year. City and state administrations officially register the family as a home-education family upon receiving these notifications. Administrators then inform parents that home education must meet certain requirements and that they will be subject to state and city inquiries to verify their effectiveness.

City and state inquiries are similar but also differ in several ways. Since the enactment of a 1936 law, the State has delegated to city councils the responsibility for monitoring two items.[2] First, cities must gather parents' "alleged reasons" for not enrolling their children in school. Home-educators' associations often point out that it is problematic for a public authority to require people to justify why they do not make use of a service whose use is not compulsory (Koscinski & de Oliveira, 2015). Second, city councils must determine whether all home-educated children are benefitting from a kind of instruction that is compatible with their families' living conditions and their health.

[1]It is likely that children age 3 to 6 will also be included in this legal frame starting in September 2019, see http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/dossiers/alt/ecole_de_la_confiance.

[2]This very strategic article will be commented upon below: "Les enfants soumis à l'obligation scolaire qui reçoivent l'instruction dans leur famille, y compris dans le cadre d'une inscription dans un établissement d'enseignement à distance, sont dès la première année, et tous les deux ans, l'objet d'une enquête de la mairie compétente, uniquement aux fins d'établir quelles sont les raisons alléguées par les personnes responsables, et s'il leur est donné une instruction dans la mesure compatible avec leur état de santé et les conditions de vie de la famille." (Code de l'éducation, art. L131-10). "Children subject to compulsory education who receive instruction within their families, including those enrolled in distance learning programs, will, starting in the first year and continuing every two years, be subject to an inquiry to be carried out by the appropriate mayoral office, with the single objective of establishing the reasons alleged by the persons responsible, and determining whether they are being given instruction that is compatible with their health and with their families' living conditions" (French Code of Education, art. L131-10).

Although families register every year, this municipal inquiry is carried out every 2 years. Legal texts do not specify what kind of professional should be in charge of the inquiry, nor how it should happen. The way in which cities implement this control varies depending on the resources available to them – larger cities tend to have more resources. In 2014–2015, only 51.8% of children who were home educated for the first year were investigated by their cities (French Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 12). According to parents' testimonies (Koscinski & de Oliveira, 2015), however, city inquiries often seem to be implemented by social workers. Sometimes, rural communities are so small that the mayor may investigate the single home-educating family living in the area. When they have no means to carry out the inquiry, towns are aided by one of the 101 *départements*, wider administrations that bear public responsibility for child welfare and therefore employ many social workers. However, the training, habits, and daily tasks of social workers are designed for dealing with families who face social problems or families where children are potentially in danger. This municipal inquiry about home educators may be quite atypical compared to their usual professional tasks. According to home-educators' associations, social workers illegitimately tend to perform this "city council inquiry" (*enquête de la mairie*) as if it were a "social inquiry" (*enquête sociale*), that is to say an investigation shaped by the suspicion of child abuse or other problems (Koscinski & de Oliveira, 2015). To date, this municipal side of the regulation of home education has never been academically researched. This paper arises from a current pioneering attempt to fill this gap. In this article, I will focus on the documents resulting from these city council inquiries in the specific case of one city in the Parisian suburbs.

The state side of controlling home education is better known than the municipal side. It is not my purpose here to study this side of the regulation, but I will nonetheless give a short overview. Since the first law addressing home education in 1882, it has been the French Ministry of Education's direct role to monitor home education as far as academic achievement is concerned (Robert & Seguy, 2015).[3] During the first decades, home-educated children had to pass tests based on the standards that they would have followed if they had been in school. Over the course of the 20th century, this requirement gradually faded away. In the 1990s, though, the social construction of the public problem of "sects" or "cults" led to a new legal framework. To prevent sectarian groups from "indoctrinating" children, a law was passed in 1998 that strengthened the French Ministry of Education's control over home education (Bongrand, 2016; Ollion, 2017; Palmer, 2011). Since then, a local state officer from the Ministry of Education was charged with investigating each home-educated child's academic skills every year. This "pedagogical inquiry" is also intended to check whether home-educated children are meeting the France's national education standards (*socle commun*). This inquiry is designed differently according to the child's age. Children age 6 to 10 are mostly visited at home, where state officers interview the parent(s), and then test the children. Older children, age 11 to 16, are more likely to be ordered to appear for oral and written tests within public buildings. This state side of the home-education regulatory framework is also being researched by our university team (Farges & Tenret, 2017).

France is a nation where all aspects of law usually take the form of written documents. City and state public officers write down the results of their inquiries. Administrators gather these records on their shelves and keep a file devoted to every home-educated child. Administrators are thus able to provide us with voluminous data on home education. Municipal files provide us with qualitative information about the home-educator's motives, family's living conditions, and home-educated children's health. State files provides us with qualitative information about the education given by the parents and about home-educated children's skills and progress. As far as academic research is

[3]"L'autorité de l'État compétente en matière d'éducation doit au moins une fois par an, à partir du troisième mois suivant la déclaration d'instruction par la famille, faire vérifier que l'enseignement assuré est conforme au droit de l'enfant à l'instruction tel que défini à l'article L131-1-1" (Code de l'éducation, art. L131-10). "The State authority competent in the area of education must, at least once a year, starting in the third month following the filing of a declaration of intent to home-educate, verify that the teaching being given is in accordance with the child's right to instruction as defined by article L131-1-1" (French Code of Education, art. L131-10).

concerned, these files are very interesting because they do not select families on the basis of their willingness to be investigated. Consequently, they can help researchers design samples that are more representative than samples built on support groups or social networks.

On the other hand, this type of data is obviously unable to answer all empirical questions and suffers from its own limitations. First, not all home-educating families register. This is especially the case for families who are reluctant to endure public control, such as unschoolers, who are aware that some state officers are not able to leave their school-oriented value system aside when they investigate home education (Quatrevaux, 2011). One may also assume that families who feel threatened by public control because of their very specific way of viewing education (e.g., labeled as "sectarian") are likely to avoid registration. Although it is impossible to assess the number of families who do not register, it is probably very few because registration is mandatory to apply for other public welfare and benefit programs. Failing to register also leads to a fine of 1,500 euros. These arrangements act as powerful deterrents in comparison with undergoing a home visit or inspection that has a little risk of leading to sanction: only 7% of state inquiries draw negative conclusions.

Administrative files are also limited by the what administrators wish to collect, and records are administrative interpretations of home-educating families based on their attendant procedural interactions with them. This very rich data is in no way neutral or comprehensive. Any analysis based on administrative sources must therefore be careful, and its results about families must be accompanied by results about administrative methods of investigating.

Empirical study

Background of homeschool research agenda at the University of Paris Seine Cergy-Pontoise

The research team to which I belong at the University of Paris Seine Cergy-Pontoise has been negotiating with municipal and state administrations, on national and local levels, to gain access to several collections of files and records of homeschooling families. It is, alas, not possible to focus on any one specific collection that would combine municipal and state reports about the same local home-education population. Cities are supposed to send their reports to local state administrations, but in reality they do not do so systematically. Our current research therefore only deals with city records or state records. Field studies comparing these files for the same local home-education community will be our second step.

We have been exploring the data built by state and local administrators to depict homeschooling families as well as the ways in which administrations investigate them. These negotiations are based on our commitment to explore materials in a neutral and anonymous way. Although we, tenured professors, belong to the same civil servant group as our interlocutors, this has proven to be a very long and sensitive process. But it is moving along promisingly. As one of the first articles stemming from this initiative, we hope this effort will be a forerunner to future studies about bigger cities. This article focuses on the collection from one particular city to research how city inquiries are designed and to what extent they are likely to be of use for home-education research.

Data

This study focuses on the case of Cheny, a French midsized city of about 90,000 inhabitants. Although it is important that its identity remain unknown – *Cheny* is a pseudonym – it is possible to sum up some features. Cheny is located in the Paris area (*Île-de-France*), where one fifth of the French population resides. The Parisian suburbs are sometimes depicted, especially in the media, as risky or poor, but this is mainly false. Cheny is far from being a ghetto, though it has a high rate of social housing (40%) and an unemployment rate slightly higher than the national average (13% vs. 10%). It belongs to the "red belt," where local authorities have been under Communist leadership

since the 1920s. Communism developed a strong involvement in the daily lives of Cheny's inhabitants by providing substantial social, cultural, or housing amenities.

I had the opportunity to interview Cheny's head of education thanks to another sociological study I am involved in. This other research project focuses on the relationships between parents and school boards. During an interview with Cheny's elected officer responsible for education, I mentioned my interest in home education. The officer immediately and vividly referred to the growing number of home educators in the city. Above all, she expressed a concern: according to her, this growth was due to worrying religious issues. I immediately seized the opportunity to propose to investigate the topic by exploring the city council files. Many negotiations later, my university and the city eventually signed an agreement securing access to the files gathered by the city council – namely, the reports written following the inquiries conducted by municipal authorities as required by home-education regulations. Once registered, every child and his or her parents are summoned for a meeting with a civil servant to talk about their motives and instructional practices.

My research here mainly relies on the analysis of the 50 reports written after such meetings between 2010 and 2016 with one to four children per report. These reports account for 70 inquiries regarding about 54 children from 36 families. I also led an interview with the official who carried out all these inquiries to understand how they are designed and implemented.

Methodology and research questions

This article draws on the comparative analysis of 50 written reports. First, I inventoried the different kinds of information noted by the civil servant (children's ages, educational practices, leisure activities, etc.). Second, I compared this list of categories with the goals assigned by the law to municipal inquiries so as to identify any gaps between the official procedures and the reality of these investigations. Third, I synthesized the information from the reports into statistics on Cheny's home-educating population.

I conducted these analyses to address two intertwined research aims. First, I depict how Cheny's administration regulates home education. This is an opportunity to determine whether this city council implements its legal mandate in a way that home-educators' associations see as excessively influenced by the social work model (i.e., suspecting child welfare problems). More generally, this is an opportunity to assess how a public administration such as a city council might view home education. In France, city councils are not in charge of educating children. They are only responsible for building and maintaining school buildings – in schools that home-educated children do not attend. In this context, what kind of information do city authorities prioritize?

Second, I describe the landscape of home education that is sketched out by this collection of reports. Based on this local exhaustive material, we can especially try to discuss whether claims by certain groups have empirical evidence to support them. This article thus provides us with the opportunity to test to what extent municipal files might be of interest as far as home-education research is concerned.

Findings about home-education regulation based on municipal records

Cheny's inquiries roughly comply with the expectations expressed by the state through the article L.131–5 of the *Code de l'éducation* (French Code of Education): each of the 70 files deal with the parents' alleged reasons for home education and with the instruction given to the children, i.e., the "single objective" of the inquiry. It is nevertheless interesting to identify small or big gaps in relation to the law that these inquiries are supposed to implement.

The choice of hearing the child's point of view

In every written report, what the law initially worded as "reasons alleged by the persons responsible for the child for giving instruction within the family" is reworded as "the choice of motivation for home instruction by the family." The phrase *by the family* adequately reflects the fact that reports do not consider only parents' reasons, but also children's opinions about being home educated. This broadening (or reinvention) is of major importance. On the one hand, it reveals how the city deals with the tension between two principles behind the regulation of home education (i.e., between preserving parental freedom regarding education and the need to ascertain that the child is meeting state-established learning goals). Here, Cheny's inquiries practically bring up a third criterion for evaluating home education: the child's own point of view. As Cheny's civil servant puts it in an interview, "What interests me, what I want to get a feel for, is the freedom of speech that the child has." The child is not required to justify his or her situation by a reason or argument, but rather to express a personal desire or feeling, whose mention in the report could be legitimate as the expression of a "motivation." This way, a kind of agency is attributed to children. On the other hand, gathering children's motives makes it mechanically or intentionally possible for the investigator to assess if and how children agree with the parental decision not to enroll them in school: having the child talk is a way to check the plausibility of parents' alleged reasons. According to the civil servant, it is nevertheless a limited means: when a child expresses a view dissenting from his or her parents, the inquiry cannot move forward in this direction, because it would put the child in an uncomfortable position.

A limited interest in the child's health and families' living conditions

According to the law, cities are assigned by the state to inquire "whether [children] are being given instruction that is compatible with their health and with their families' living conditions" (*Code de l'éducation*, art. L131-10). What exactly these legal requirements mean remains unclear. Should the civil servant deal with medical data? Should families' living conditions be evaluated through housing, salaries, or other indicators? How should investigators understand and implement the concept of "compatibility?" City inquiries are all the more diverse in that no national document existed to answer these questions before November 2017 (French State Department & French Ministry of Education, 2017). In Cheny, each of the 70 inquiries carried out between 2011 and 2016 took instruction into consideration, but it is not systematically discussed within the two perspectives of "health" and "families' living conditions."

Regarding the child's health, 47 accounts out of 70 do not even mention it at all. This silence reflects inquiries leading to the conclusion that no specific health matter need be mentioned. The civil servant thus explained to me that she "[does] not want to see the child's health record." Every investigated family is supposed to come to the meeting with a certificate attesting that a physician monitors the child's health. For the civil servant in Cheny, who has no professional knowledge or legitimacy to deal with health, this certificate is enough to address requirements for health assessments. The remaining 23 reports do mention something with respect to health. Three out of these 23 reports mention health as a motive for home educating (decreasing children's tiredness, promoting better health), 10 out of 23 depict health as an issue that is being taken care of (e.g., reports explicitly stating that the child is being monitored by a physician, or reports checking vaccination status), and 6 out of 23 bring together both of these perspectives (e.g., reports mention a medical condition as the reason for home educating and includes details on how the child is medically monitored). In these 19 reports out of 23, then, health is either an alleged reason for home educating or the outright object of the inquiry. Yet these reports do not draw any explicit relationships between health and the instruction provided, as article L131-10 literally requires them to do. Such is the case with only four out of 23 reports (and therefore 70 reports). Two reports mention a father who stated that his two children had no health problems and were thus denied free access to the public distance learning

service. In two other accounts, the impossibility of taking swimming or handball lessons is linked with medical reasons. The municipal inquiries in Cheny obviously do not consistently assess health issues as required by the regulatory framework.

The gap between the legal objectives and the content of the reports is especially spectacular concerning the "families' living conditions." Despite the assignment of assessing children's instruction from this perspective, no single report provides us with information about these living conditions. In Cheny, in contrast with some other cities' reports based on a home visit, civil servants carrying out the inquiry do not write down whether the family lives in an individual house or in a collective building. Nor is there mention of whether the child has his or her own bedroom. There is likewise no mention of the parents' income or profession. During our interview, the civil servant argued that home visits were only possible with a "special authorization." However, this assumption is disproved by our other investigations in other French cities. This mistaken belief or assumption reflects this civil servant's view that living conditions are not a legitimate criterion for questioning parental instruction or for relativizing the right to education. This omission also indicates that the city controller is simply more concerned about other prominent questions, some of which I discuss in the next section.

Monitoring "socialization" through the use of public amenities

City files about home-educating families emphasize two unexpected topics that are highly linked with the city's own specific activities. First, the city's spreadsheet devotes a column to the name of the schools that home-educated children would attend if they were schooled. Because the city needs to know how many children are schooled in every primary school, and how primary schools are assessed by the local population, it is important for the city to develop a localized understanding of home education. This information proves to be fruitful if we note that, although 36 registered home-educated children belong to the sector of nine primary schools, 19 children belong to the sectors of only two schools. Thus, implementing control over home education might serve as a tool for monitoring primary schools (here, two schools appear to be more often avoided, or more fragile) or neighborhood dynamics. This interpretation fits with the fact that though information about the name of the public school that a home-educated child would theoretically attend if he or she were schooled is systematically mentioned for primary-school-age children, this is the case for only six of the 32 older kids.

This pattern reveals the effect of the municipality's own interests on the implementation of its regulatory system. In France, cities are responsible for primary school buildings, whereas middle and high schools are managed by other administrations. Yet cities are in charge of inquiring about all school-age kids. Although it seems that it would be feasible to investigate for children of any age the name of the school they would attend if they were schooled, Cheny does so systematically for primary school, but barely for middle and high school. Thus, the way in which the city carries out the assigned state inquiry proves to be oriented by the city's own issues.

This city-centered way of evaluating home education is confirmed by the second unexpected item that is systematically present in reports. Cheny's civil servants always check whether the child under investigation belongs to municipal sports associations, if he or she attends the municipal library, or if the family spends time in municipal parks or using sports facilities. Questioning the child's "socialization," the city controller appears to be very interested in checking whether city supplies or amenities are in use. Some reports even recount that the civil servant argued with or encouraged the family to do these things. In this way, home-education regulation becomes a tool to assess and also to strengthen the city's sports and culture programs. In the Parisian red-belt municipalities, the Communist Party developed extensive public funding to structure the community – and the electorate – through strong public actions and communal leisure activities. Home education is assessed within this political frame: home-educating families are expected to be aware of the municipal sports, cultural, and leisure amenities, and to use them. When Cheny's administration decided to organize home-education control in January 2010, the decision

was immediately made to provide every home-educating family with a directory listing all city associations and collective activities.

To conclude, these reports reflect first and foremost the city's own questions about home education. Although legal requirements about health and families' living conditions are barely mentioned, the civil servant in Cheny monitors the child's point of view and his or her use of public amenities. These topics are related to the same concern: the civil servant wants to see whether the child has the opportunity for some physical or intellectual distance from his or her parents. The civil servant sums up this concern with the word *socialization*. In this specific sense, socialization happens to be the main question raised by the Cheny municipal employees while investigating home educators. Forthcoming studies will provide interesting points of comparison with this case: do other cities take the same initiative in monitoring "socialization?" Do they also focus on the use of public amenities? Should differences between cities be attributed to differences between the political parties leading city councils, or rather to the professions of the civil servants handling these investigations? Such investigations would be useful for understanding home-education regulation. But now let us see what the reports teach us about home educators themselves.

Using municipal records to learn about home educators

There has been no academic use of municipal files to study home education in France. In this last section, I compare the data from Cheny with some unpublished national figures about home educators in France (French Ministry of Education, 2016a). This national data provides us with useful orders of magnitude for making comparisons and reminding us that a case study of a single city differs significantly from national aggregates.

Researching home education on a local scale deals with very small figures. Between 2010 and 2016, the administration in Cheny registered 70 children belonging to 44 families. In 2015, this community represented about 0.23% of the city's school-age population, slightly below the French average (0.3%). Out of this registered population, one in five (15 kids from eight families) did not meet with a civil servant, probably because the parents moved away during the year, or reenrolled their children in school, or, sometimes reluctantly, postponed the inquiry date. Still, the city has some data about them, notably about their educational practices.

In the case study of Cheny, this corpus sheds light on three of most frequently asked questions about home educators. How do parents teach their children? Municipal reports make note of ways of educating. Why do they choose to home educate? It is a legal requirement for the city to ask parents their "reasons" for not schooling. Should home educators raise public concern, and do they? Reports show that the civil servant in Cheny shares with national regulators the belief that, for a very small number of home-educated children, it is legitimate to worry that they could be raised to be against republican values.

Instruction: the widespread use of formal learning

A main feature of the social movement behind contemporary French home education is the weight of informal learning or arguments in favor of unschooling within the discourse of the main national associations of home educators (Bongrand, 2018). In contrast with the United States (Gaither, 2017; Stevens, 2001), there is no national association in place with strong advocacy for religion-based or conservative home education in France. Informal learning and alternative methods of education seem to be a substantial motive for home educating. In this context, it is interesting to examine whether families use distance learning services (i.e., formal teaching methods). It is theoretically compatible for an "unschooled" child to choose to attend distance education classes: if it is his or her own autonomous choice and not imposed by parents, formal academics are a legitimate part of unschooling (Plavis, 2017). But here we assume that this is very exceptional and that an unschooling family would hardly enroll in a traditional French distance education service. In Cheny, this information is available for 67 of the 70 registered children. Among them, 12 do not use distance

learning material, while 55 do. The National Center for Distance Education (*Centre national d'enseignement à distance [CNED]*) is unsurprisingly the main curriculum used: 33 out of 55 children subscribe, exclusively or not, to this public agency. The families of the 22 other children subscribe to five other companies, whose materials are neither informal nor unschooling based. Could we consider that only the 12 children who do not use a distance education provider are unschooled? In Cheny, the choice not to use distance education services tends to be linked with the child's age. Although registered home-educated children are equally distributed between primary and secondary school age, 11 of the 12 children with no distance education are primary school age. Does this mean that unschooling is more in use between ages 6 and 11, when requirements for teaching expertise or academic competition might be perceived to be lower? If I check what city reports contain about the education of these 11 children, I see that six of the eight families use school books, fixed timetables, homework, or that there are other clues hardly compatible with informal learning and unschooling. The seventh family was not investigated because the father's job caused them to live some months abroad. In the eighth family, the child "cannot easily describe the division of her daily rhythm between play and schoolwork," a confusion that could reflect the use of primarily informal ways of teaching or learning. But this family is also depicted as "pretty closed in upon itself (…) [with] a strong will to keep the child away from any confrontation with an environment they view as threatening to the education they want to give," an attitude hardly compatible with unschooling.

Of course, one could posit that unschoolers are more likely to avoid registering with the city (an illegal situation depriving of the benefit of some public welfare programs and punished with a 1500-euro fine) and that families strategically put school-at-home practices forward to avoid awakening the suspicions of the inspector. Publicly recorded alleged practices would then be the least dependable source for research on home-education practices. But the proportion of families using distance education in Cheny (82%) is higher than the French average (70.6%). The pedagogical style of all such distance education providers, as well as the educational practices of the families, all confirm the robustness of the assumption that there may be a significant gap between the discourse of national advocates for home education and local (discourses about) pedagogical practices.

Motives: Qualitative reports uncover parental motives ignored by national government surveys, and notably school dissatisfaction

In France as well as in other countries, social, political, and academic actors often ask why parents choose to home educate. Cheny's reports answer this question because in the strict framework of the legal assignment, they provide "alleged reasons" for homeschooling. Nevertheless, the tasks of classifying and counting them call for methodological caution for many reasons.

First, any portrayal of home-educators' motives is framed by the source that researchers use (Spiegler, 2010). Here, we deal with alleged reasons expressed for and reported by a public agent. Some parents could be aware of the current illegitimacy of their intimate motives (e.g., sectarian worldviews) and therefore have strategies to emphasize "good" or consensual motives (e.g., fostering the child's personal learning style). Conversely, the so-called alleged motives may be influenced by the city civil servant's interpretations: some motives are guessed at or suspected more than actually heard, and some others are not written down. This is why these motives must be analyzed first and foremost as recorded and reported reasons.

Second, every report exists in a narrative cumulating in heterogeneous reasons that are hardly reducible to one main motive. For instance, in one single account, parents put forward that they "do not like the attitudes encountered in school (fighting, rudeness…)," that the "school-day lasts too long," that "French public education does not guarantee equal opportunity," and that they "chose school avoidance because 'laicity' [i.e., French public policy in regard to religion] is not compatible with all values." Upon reviewing the alleged reasons evoked in 70 reports without subsuming close formulations, each account mentions between two and eight of 239 alleged reasons. Aggregating

them into a small number therefore calls for the application of exogenous categories – as I will develop below.

Third, the same family's reasons for home educating might be depicted differently from one inquiry to the next. Thirteen of the 55 children under investigation met two or three times with the civil servant. Comparing their first and second reports shows that 2 years after a first inquiry, in noting the family's reasons for home educating, reports are more likely to mention parental "values" rather than circumstances that led to removal from school or to nonenrollment. Simultaneously, the focus on the drawbacks of school vanishes in the later reports, which tend to emphasize the advantages of home education instead. Second-year inquiries are thus more appropriate for understanding the motives of established home educators. But here in Cheny there are too few of these, so I have left them aside to create a consistent corpus and focus on the starting motives gathered during the first year of home education.

What do we learn if we compare the parental motives reported in Cheny with national data? In 2016, the central French administration compiled two data sets of home-educators' motives. On the one hand, they gathered reasons given by the parents of the 15,059 kids who obtained an authorized registration (i.e., free and labeled as justified) in the National Distance Learning Center (CNED) (Table 1, column 1). On the other hand, they synthesized cities' inquiries about the remaining 9,819 registered home educators (column 2). These classifications are meant to allocate only one main

Table 1. Home educators' motives through the state lens.

		I	II	III
Field		France	France	Cheny
Home education status		Home education with authorized CNED	Home education without authorized CNED	Home education with or without CNED
Year		2014–2015	2014–2015	2010–2016
Source of motives		CNED figures	City inquiries	Cheny's 1st inquiry reports
Source of coding		French Ministry of Education	French Ministry of Education	Researcher
Unit		Children's main motive	Children's main motive	Children's various motives
Number of motives		*n* = 15,059 motives (one main motive for each of 15,059 children) (%)	*n* = 9,819 motives (one main motive for each of 9,819 children) (%)	*n* = 199 various motives (all motives expressed for about 54 children) (%)
State classification	Child's inadaptation to school system and school phobia	X	6.5	4
	Health problems	19.4	3.3	2
	Traveling parents	63.6	2.9	1
	Religion	X	1.4	1
	Geographical distance from school	4.2	0.8	3.5
	Special curriculum (high-level sports, arts, etc.)	6.3	0.6	1.5
	Disability	1.5	X	0
	Other motives	4.9	13.6	87
	Unknown motives	0	70.9	0
	Total	100	100	100

Note. CNED = Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance [National Center for Distance Education].
X = the State did not use the line's motive to classify.

motive per child. In column 3, I use this typology to classify the 199 motives given by families in Cheny as reported in municipal records. In other words, unlike the national data, a single child may have multiple reasons for homeschooling.

Comparisons of motives across the different sources listed in table must be taken cautiously because it compiles information based upon different classification systems. However, the comparisons are still insightful. Column 1 lists the distribution of parental motives based on the CNED records and its classification system. About 95% families find a way to express their motives for home educating through a state-recognized category. Column 2 is missing information for 70.9% of the population and therefore "does not allow for dependable conclusions" (French Ministry of Education, 2016a). This table shows is how problematic state records are for perceiving families' motives: according to column 2, if we consider the alleged reasons transmitted by cities to the central administration (29.1%), half of them are "other motives" (13.9%). When I tried to allocate the 199 motives into the state's classifications in a very liberal way to find a match, I succeeded in linking only 13% of Cheny's motives to one of these seven items included in the state's nomenclature (i.e., child's inadaptation to school system and school phobia, health problems, disability, traveling parents, religion, geographical distance from school, special curriculum such as high-level sports or arts). So this typology, which reveals that the state considers home education as the effect of external constraints making it impossible to send children to school, actually shows what many motives are not rather than what they are.

This state typology aside, it is possible to aggregate the 199 motives reported in 54 available accounts of a first inquiry into four categories. First, more than one fourth of the 199 motives attribute the choice of home education to the parents' wishes (the wish to strengthen family relationships or to enjoy a certain lifestyle, a mother's availability and pleasure in teaching, or an alternative pedagogical project). Second, one motive in five relates to schools: the family renounced using this public service because of the state of the local school, its inability to make the child succeed or to communicate with the parents, a lack of security, and so on. Third, the child's needs, preferences or projects are mentioned in 21% of given motives. Fourth, a little less frequently, motives point to a desire to keep children away from the *"bad company"* of other students in school or in the streets. Interestingly, in their accounts of these 54 home-educated children, three fourths of the reports cite motives from these four different categories.

To conclude, this analysis shows how an incomplete classification leads the state to ignore (or to underestimate) dissatisfaction with schools, parents' pleasure in teaching their children, or their refusal of certain environments. These common categories in international research on home education are not yet in the French state's focus, though cities' reports, such as those in Cheny, do make it possible to be aware of these recurring motives.

Self-recognized and/or labeled deviance

Do parents choose home education because they do not share and wish their children to avoid some values that are taught in schools? Do home educators choose to express such disagreements when they meet with municipal controllers? Of course, we may suppose that some families might avoid expressing their dissent to present themselves to controllers in a positive light. In such cases, their private thoughts would not appear in written accounts. But uncovering ideological gaps and therefore labeling parental deviance is one of the goals of these public inquiries: alternative values or deviant practices are exactly what public controllers are keen to identify and to report, notably as matter of concern. Therefore, municipal reports are an interesting source for research on the alternative values of home educators, even if controllers go beyond what parents explicitly endorse. Furthermore, if a family clearly expresses its critical view in front of a controller, and if this controller quotes these criticisms in the written account, this will suggest that parents are deeply involved in alternative values, and that they have endorsed a deviant way of life.

Civil servants reported some reason for concern about the decision to home educate for 24 children from 17 families (out of 54 investigated kids from 36 families). The most frequently

recurring concern deals with the family's integration into the city. As far as 18 children from 11 families are concerned, the report mentions or expresses worry about (a) a family that is "closed in on itself," (b) the family's negative perception of the neighborhood, (c) their will to control the social and cultural environment in which their children grow up, (d) children who do not attend public amenities such as libraries or museums, or (e) the disinterest expressed by the parents when the civil servant recommends that they begin to use these public services. Here the reports depict as a concern the clear refusal by home educators to treat their immediate neighborhood as a legitimate environment with which to interact.

Other concerns are less prevalent. A second kind of concern deals with the child's well-being. Most reports recount the way the child behaved and answered during the interview to evaluate his or her "personal development." In 10 inquiries regarding 10 different families, doubts are expressed because "it is difficult to guess what she thinks" or because "before any answer, she looks for her mother's approval." Two reports also depict a situation where home education seems to be the result of a disagreement between a child willing to attend the local public school and parents who have failed to convince the child to attend another private school. Here the reports mention concern for the lack of freedom of thought and autonomy allowed by home educators to their children. This raises the question of parent–child power relationships. The third main concern expressed by the municipal agent, and therefore a third way to question whether home educators have alternative ways of life or thinking, consists of doubts about the quality of the curriculum. Such is the case when the civil servant in Cheny questioned the absence of some participants or one mother's ability to teach French. An issue that seems to elicit this doubt is the child's inability to describe his or her learning activities. This category of concern, raised for eight children from eight different families, corresponds to the children's right to education. It also raises the question of how parents could continue to feel confident in their ability to teach their children in cases where a public agent expresses doubt about it.

Two other issues regarding home educators usually generate attention from French public authorities: gender and religion. First, does home education promote gender inequity? In 2016, the French Ministry of Education expressed the fear that home education would prevent more girls from attending school. The 2015 national survey about home education concluded that this assumption was false, stating that girls were even slightly less numerous (49.3%) than boys (50.7%) (French Ministry of Education, 2016b). Home-educated kids in Cheny do in fact include more girls (39) than boys (31). These numbers are too small to make the gap significant, but they do echo a national political concern. In their reports, the civil servants of Cheny do not seem to worry about this point. But it is all the more noticeable that girls are proportionally more likely to be found in a family on whose account a concern is expressed: 21 children out of 24 whose report raises a concern are girls.

On the other hand, does home education arise from a specific attitude toward religion? In Cheny, religion appears in the municipal reports accounting for 13 children belonging to nine families (out of 54 children belonging to 36 families). Clues mainly emerge when parents justify home education because they have no access to a religious school (three families), when the report depicts homeschooled children's learning activities by mentioning that the child attends classes through a religious association for language or religious instruction (five families), or when a mother describes her teaching material with reference to a religious support group (one family). Seven of these nine families are Muslim, and two are Christian. Political debates about home education treat this as a question of major importance. Since the Paris attacks, French public policies mainly view home-education regulation as a means to prevent religious "radicalization." Is this religious dimension a prevalent concern of the civil servant in Cheny – i.e., do official inquiries partially serve to identify an alternative way of life or thinking? Of these nine families, four belong to the 17 families whose files raised concerns. By counting in terms of families (four out of 17) or in terms of children (seven out of 24), the proportion of inquiries mentioning religion is the same in families whose files raised concerns as within the overall investigated population (respectively nine out of 36 and 13 out of 54), about one fourth. The data from Cheny here confirms how confusing it can be to associate religion with danger – an assumption that French public discourse about home education often ignores.

Conclusion

This exploratory study mainly illustrates that the interest of public records, here in the specific case of municipal records, is twofold. First, public records convey information about home-education regulation. Reports reflect how this marginal phenomenon raises the attention of the public administration. As far as the municipality of Cheny is concerned, controlling home education is a means of monitoring the use of public amenities, or to identify what is lacking or malfunctioning in certain neighborhoods, rather than to monitor children's health or families' living conditions. Home educators are viewed as inhabitants grounded in a place: the interviews of home-educating parents by civil authorities are implemented as a way to check whether like-minded communities are developing far away from public institutions, and also as a potential tool for normalizing (and municipalizing) the residents' way of life. As compared with the legal requirements, this municipal concern is unexpected. One could assume that this municipal bias fosters the running concern about home-educated children's "socialization": home education is considered less as a positive parental choice ("with whom do their kids meet?") than as a failure on the part of the municipality ("why do public amenities or activities in the local neighborhood not satisfy these families?").

Second, written reports are an interesting source about the home-educating population. For instance, Cheny's accounts clearly show that the informal way of practicing home education – that is, unschooling – as it appears in the discourse of dominant associations or in the media is not mainly practiced in this city. Formal learning is no doubt the main way of home educating. These reports are also an appropriate source of information to build demographics because the city's data are exhaustive as far as the home-educating community living within the municipal borders is concerned. In a country where it is mandatory to declare home education, there is no better way to determine how old or what gender home-educated children are. Cheny is a disappointing case study because it does not produce raw information about the families' compositions, or about the parents' socioprofessional statuses or levels of education. Such information seems possible to gather, though, and one could expect to find it first and foremost on administrative shelves. This kind of basic information, for the aggregation of which there are strong classifications in use, is typically what public records could rigorously document.

These advantages should not mask the limits that they carry. Their twofold interest relies on the fact that these reports reflect the investigators' point of view about what the family revealed to them. If these reports are so relevant for studying the way cities consider and regulate home education, it is because municipal inquiries have significant leeway in implementing the legal requirements and so their controls and reports are very diverse from one city to another. But this diversity contradicts the other side of the twofold analysis: it gives the possibility for a city to ignore or not to monitor some crucial points (such as social status in Cheny) and it weakens the possibility of comparing cities' knowledge about home-educating communities.

Forthcoming studies will therefore develop this point. If they are dealt with carefully, these reports deserve consideration as legitimate sources of information about home education. Research should be undertaken to tackle the nature of their bias, for instance by researching how families prepare themselves before they meet with controllers, by conducting phenomenologies of how controllers write their accounts, or by researching how written reports are commented upon by families. Such research would provide the opportunity to discuss the compared advantages of interviewing, observing, and analyzing written accounts.

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