The inequalities in French primary-school children’s level of political knowledge: theoretical hypotheses and methodological issues

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The unequal distribution of political knowledge among citizens is today considered as a well-established fact in political science. Diverse studies showed that the level of political knowledge was correlated to variables such as gender, age, level of education and socioeconomic situation (Converse 1964; Gaxie 1978; Delli Carpini, Keeter 1993; Mondak 2001, etc.). As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) put it, knowledge, and specifically political knowledge, is acquired when individuals are exposed to information (opportunity) and have prior general skills to store it in their memory (ability) as well as incentives and willingness to do so (motivation). All three factors (opportunity, ability and motivation) can be considered as mainly influenced by the social context and by socialization, which refers to the way environment has shaped individuals in the past.

Studying children can enlighten the understanding of political knowledge for three main reasons: first, because it allows to check the assumption that some environment-based inequalities in the acquisition of political knowledge take their roots in early life, mostly through family socialization; second, because children are studied at the very beginning of their acquisition of knowledge, making the processes more visible: as Piaget puts it, « when only considering the adult, we only perceive already-formed mechanisms, while when following children’s development, we reach formation and formation only is explicative » (1972, p.139, *my translation*); and last, because studying children can enlighten us about methodological issues, which can be considered as a stereotype of those that are observed in adults.

This paper falls within a study on children’s political socialization, which aims to better understand how they progressively acquire knowledge and opinions about the political
universe, according to their social background and individual characteristics (see the description of the empirical study in the boxed text below). Political socialization is considered as being the set of experiences through which individuals acquire frameworks and tools for understanding and evaluating the political and social world, progressively building a both cognitive and normative individual relation to the political universe. Socialization will moreover be considered as a “global coextensive process” (Gaxie 2002, p.170) in that it takes place all life long, latter experiences being susceptible to add to, contrast with or nuance former ones. This implies that by nature the effects of childhood socialization have no reason to be more durable or important than other socialization experiences. However, there are great chances that the context faced by individuals during their childhood will not dramatically change when they grow up, which makes persistency statistically probable. Moreover, it seems that individuals are especially resistant to change when beliefs and values are concerned, an important set of which seeming to be acquired during childhood (Percheron 1993, Maurer 2001). Childhood socialization may therefore have long-lasting effects, although important drifts are not unlikely to happen if future experience contrasts with childhood socialization.

Although recent research has re-opened the study of political socialization of children, there remain important interrogations concerning early socialization processes. Most recent studies conduct qualitative methods, which seem most appropriate for the understanding of political representations (see for example Howard, Gill 2000; Throssell 2012; Boone 2013). However, it seems that there lacks basic quantitative data concerning children: one of the areas we have only very few information about is the extent to which children are knowledgeable about politics, to the noteworthy exception of the German LLV study that provides recent data on first year primary-school children (Vollmar 2010; Van Deth, Abendschön, Vollmar, 2011 ; Wessa 2013).

Political knowledge will here be studied in its narrow conception, as the possession of a set of factual knowledge about the political sphere. The political knowledge level can analytically be separated in three elements: the understanding of the political system and of democratic mechanisms; the appreciation of political duties and of the personalities and groups attending them; and a global perception of the political context, which implies an appreciation of the major political events, ideas and cleavages (Delli Carpini, Keeter 1993 ; Luskin, Bullock 2004). It is important to distinguish between this theoretical definition of political knowledge and the results of its empirical measures: surveys can only provide more
or less valid and reliable estimations of political knowledge, and it is important to keep in mind that the results always depend on the method (Kuklinski, Quirk 2001). Indeed, when asking knowledge questions, researchers generally assume that the interviewee either knows or doesn’t know the answer. In fact, as Mondak has shown, “four behavioral states exist: (1) fully informed (i.e., the respondent truly does know the answer to our question); (2) partially informed (the respondent either possesses an incomplete understanding, or the respondent can rule out an incorrect choice option on a multiple-choice item); (3) misinformed (the respondent believes he or she knows the correct answer, but is mistaken); and (4) uninformed (the respondent holds no knowledge pertinent to the question)” (2001, p.202 – 203).

Knowledge tests can never provide a perfectly precise evaluation of an individual’s knowledge on a precise question as it will mechanically tend to give out binary results (wrong or correct answer).

Moreover, the choice of the items strongly determines the overall results, which makes any knowledge test arbitrary, as it cannot cover the integrality of a field of knowledge in exact proportions. This is especially true when political knowledge is concerned, because the delimitation of what is relevant to this field depends on theoretical constructs, and because different individuals might possess different domain-specific knowledge according to their social or personal characteristics (Delli Carpini, Keeter 1996). The choice to include or omit questions therefore has important consequences on the individual and collective results.

Knowledge tests must therefore be analyzed for what they are, i.e. rough evaluations of individual’s knowledge according to a defined criterion (Kuklinski, Quirk 2001). As a consequence, the main interest of these tests is that they allow comparisons between individuals and between groups. Concerning this study, beyond determining what kind of knowledge can be acquired in primary-school, the major objective will be to study the roots of knowledge inequalities by comparing the results of large-size groups of children.

In this paper, I summarize the main hypothesis stemming from the primary results, regarding the factors favoring political knowledge, the methodological issues that could bias the results, and finally the potential impacts of the political knowledge level.
Empirical data:

The study is currently being led in several primary schools in the area of Montpellier, a middle-sized city in southern France. Children from 8 to 11 are being surveyed in schools that have been chosen to be as heterogeneous as possible concerning their location (rural, suburb, city-center, etc.), their status (public, private, or associative) and the socioeconomic situation of the children attending them. All together, a minimum of 700 children should be surveyed in the first wave of the study.

Children are surveyed by questionnaires that they fill up individually during class-time. There are three types of items in the questionnaire: diverse questions about their family, habits, socioeconomic background, political orientation of their parents, etc.; opinion questions of different kinds; knowledge questions. The knowledge question that most interest us here are of two types: children are asked to recognize some well-known political figures on photographs in open questions; they are also asked a series of multiple-choice questions concerning political figures, parties and institutions (see a translation of the knowledge test in Appendix 1). Unfortunately this study is still in progress and the results have not been interpreted yet.

However a preliminary research led in 2013 for a master thesis provides primary results. The study took place in two socially-contrasted schools of Montpellier, one situated in one of the most disadvantaged area of the city and the other one in an upper-middle-class center-city neighborhood. 116 children answered the questionnaire, making it difficult to allow very precise regressive analysis. The items of this questionnaire are quite close to the study in progress (except that most items were open-questions) and it provided some findings that helped building most of the hypothesis that are presented here.

I. Factors of political knowledge

In this section, we will examine the different factors that might influence political knowledge and that are being tested in the study. These factors are all related and will systematically be analyzed using regressive analysis. The primary results allowed building a linear model that can be considered as a first set of results on the variables weighing on
political knowledge. However it is important to keep in mind that only two schools were investigated in this study, therefore it is not possible to conclude that these results can be applied to children in general.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Constant)(^1)</th>
<th>-4.302**</th>
<th>(1.580)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School(^2)</td>
<td>.310***</td>
<td>(.483)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class(^3)</td>
<td>.255**</td>
<td>(.287)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level(^4)</td>
<td>.449***</td>
<td>(.221)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender(^5)</td>
<td>-.150*</td>
<td>(.448)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News watching(^6)</td>
<td>.166*</td>
<td>(477)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest for politics(^7)</td>
<td>.189*</td>
<td>(.224)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=116  *=p<05  **=p<01  ***=p<0.001  
F = 15,154 (sig =.000)  \(R^2=.445\)

First line : Bêta coefficients  
Second line : standard errors in parentheses

**Table 1: variables weighing on the grades to the political knowledge test (results of the preliminary study)**

1. Social factors:

These results show that one of the factors that mainly impact on political knowledge is the social background of the children, here indicated by the school they attend. Because of the location of the disadvantaged school, it is possible to admit that the vast majority of children

\(^1\) Dependant variable : grade to the knowledge test (out of 15)  
\(^2\) Coding: disadvantaged school 1; favored school 2. The school variable must therefore be understood as an indication of the pupil's social environment (see below for more detail)  
\(^3\) In France, classes are built on age groups. Coding : CE2 (children aged 8-9 years old) 1 ; CM1 (children aged 9-10 years old) 2 ; CM2 (children aged 10-11 years old) 3  
\(^4\) Estimation of the children’s level by their teachers. Coding : very good pupil 4; good pupil 3 ; pupil facing difficulties 2 ; pupil facing great difficulties 1  
\(^5\) Coding : Girl 1 ; Boy 2  
\(^6\) Question: at home, does your family watch the news : everyday/often 2 ; rarely/never 1  
\(^7\) Question: are you interested in politics? Yes, a lot / Yes, a little 2 ; Not a lot / Not at all 1
attending it grow in lower-class families, which was confirmed by the questions on their parents’ occupation. In the favored school, the social situation of the children seems to be more heterogeneous. Out of 15 questions, the children from the socially disadvantaged school got an average of 3.7 correct answers, while the children from the socially favored school got 6.5. The most difficult the questions were (i.e. the most discriminative) the sharpest the differences between the schools got. The social contrast between the schools was strong enough to use the school variable as a rough but sufficient indication of the children’s social environment: the total number of children surveyed was too small to allow a finer analysis on their parent’s occupation because a lot of children did not answer the question on their parent’s occupation precisely enough. For the study in progress, children are being asked directly and individually to precise their answers when necessary. From an analytical point of view and for the study in progress, distinctions can be made between different factors:

→ **Political knowledge and parental occupation:** because political knowledge tends to grow with social position in adults, and because it seems that one of the main sources of children’s political knowledge is their parents, we can expect children’s knowledge to be correlated to their parents’ socioeconomic situation. Because the only information asked to children about this is their parent’s current occupation, and because this information is not always relevant (for example in blended families a stepfather’s occupation might be more relevant than a father’s), this kind of correlation can only be considered reliable when elaborating large-scale quantitative data. Among the occupation information, several variables can be distinguished: an estimation of the level of education of parents (that cannot directly be asked to children who are generally not aware of it), an evaluation of the social environment they work in, and an estimation of their economic situation. Rough levels of social, cultural and economic capitals (thought in the bourdieusien sense, Bourdieu 1979) can therefore be estimated.

→ **Nationality and origin:** Origin can have an important impact on knowledge levels for different reasons: first, it can be expected than children whose parents have immigrated recently will be less likely to have a high political knowledge level as their parents themselves might not be very aware of French politics. Second, ethnic issues might have an influence on domain-specific knowledge: Marine Le Pen, for example, was in the primary study well

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8 Out of the children who answered the question precisely enough (N=47/61), 94% are grown in a family where the occupation of neither of their parents requires baccalaureate qualification.

9 Out of the children who answered this question precisely enough (N=47/55), 23% are grown in a family where the occupation of neither of their parents requires baccalaureate qualification. All others are grown in a family where at least one of the parents is employed in an occupation requiring high degree qualification.
known (comparatively to other politicians) among the children of the disadvantaged area where immigration rates are very high. Moreover, most children stated that she was “racist”. Finally, the origin variable is strongly correlated to the socioeconomic situation of parents, which makes it difficult to isolate its specific effect when analyzing small-scale studies. For this reason, the preliminary study offers no satisfactory results on this point.

→ **Social context:** beyond their parent’s occupation, children might be influenced by their school and neighborhood social characteristics. To an equivalent family socioeconomic situation, living and being schooled in a disadvantaged suburb area might have more discriminative effects on political knowledge than in upper-class areas. This hypothesis implies that peer-groups and social relationship outside families might influence political knowledge.

2. **Individual factors:**

→ **Age:** in the preliminary study, the knowledge gap between the youngest (8 years old) and the oldest (11 years old) children was constant but not sharp: CE2 pupils (aged 8-9 years old) got an average of 4.6/15 correct answers, CM1 pupils (aged 9-10 years old) got 5.1/15 and CM2 pupils (aged 10 – 11 years old) got 5.4/15. This might be a result of the temporal context the study was led in, less than one year after the presidential election: most children, whatever their age, were exposed to a lot of information about politics. These results seem to confirm Percheron’s hypothesis that political socialization is made of relatively stable successive stages, one of which being the period between 8 and 12 years old (Percheron 1993).

→ **Gender:** The effect of gender was strong: girls got an average of 4.1/15 and boys 5.7/15. Yet the regressive analysis does not make gender such an important variable, indicating that this variation in the average grade is mostly due to extreme cases (the best-informed children tended to be boys, the less-informed tended to be girls) rather than to a global tendency on all children. Moreover, girls tended to give their opinion less frequently than boys did. These results show that the gender gap in political knowledge takes its roots very early in childhood. Most political knowledge studies find important gender gaps (see for example Delli Carpini, Keeter 1996 ; Chiche, Haegel 2002), which can be interpreted in three different ways (Fraile 2013):

- first, as a result of position: women tend to have lower social and economic status and fewer responsibilities, all of which being correlated to the detention of political knowledge.
However the appearance of knowledge inequalities as young as 8 years old seems to nuance this hypothesis, which can therefore not be considered as the sole explanation.

- The gender gap can also be analyzed as a result of socialization, which these results seem to confirm: educational practice and collective beliefs about gender roles might impart children different attitudes and behaviors, among which a differentiated perception of knowledge.

- Finally, the gender gap can also be seen as a result of methodological effects: because of socialization differences, girls would tend to answer the tests in a way that would decrease their grades significantly (because they tend to take less risks than boys do). We will explore this option in the following section.

→ **School grades and attitudes:** it is systematically asked to teachers to indicate an evaluation of their pupil’s level (very good pupil, good pupil, average pupil, pupil facing difficulties, pupil facing great difficulties)$^{10}$, and school attitude, presented to the teacher as an estimation of the ability of children to concentrate in order to answer the questionnaire with precision (very diligent pupil, diligent pupil, irregular pupil, not diligent pupil, not at all diligent pupil). Although it is a very subjective method (it is probable that different teachers from different schools grade their pupils differently), no other information is available. For the current study, children are also asked to indicate their own estimation of their level. In the preliminary test, the correlation between the indications of teachers on their pupil’s level and the knowledge level was very extremely strong (indeed it is the first variable in the regressive analysis):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Good pupils</th>
<th>Pupils facing difficulties</th>
<th>total (N=116)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disadvantaged school</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,9 (N=33)</td>
<td>2,7 (N=28)</td>
<td>3,7 (N=61)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Favored school</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7,0 (N=44)</td>
<td>4,5 (N=11)</td>
<td>6,5 (N=55)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (N=116)</strong></td>
<td>6,1 (N=77)</td>
<td>3,3 (N=39)</td>
<td>5 (N=116)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Average (out of 15) to the knowledge test according to the pupil’s level*

There can be two complementary interpretations of this result: first, it is highly probable that the conditions and dispositions favouring school competence also favour political

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$^{10}$ This question makes sense in the French school system where children are frequently graded and where the teachers themselves frequently use these categories.
competence, in part because both are linked to socio-cultural inequalities, and in part because children with a stronger level may tend to be more curious and have better remembering skills. However, one could also conclude that children with a lower school level have more difficulties filling the questionnaire and are less meticulous, which could lead to an underestimation of their political knowledge. This issue will also be explored in detail in the next section.

3. External factors:

→ Political knowledge and family politicization: several questions are meant to evaluate children’s exposition to political messages in their family. First, they are asked about their parents’ use of media: watching news, reading newspaper, discussing politics, which are as many clues of highly politicized environments. Moreover, children are asked whether their parents vote and for whom. Beyond the objective indication of their parent’s votes, the fact that children know their parent’s political orientations is a sign that this topic has been discussed with or in front of them. Once more, this variable is strongly correlated to the socioeconomic variables: favored environments tend to offer more politicization opportunities. The following table moreover shows that media use might have differential impacts on children’s knowledge according to their social environment: the knowledge level of children from the disadvantaged school is clearly enhanced when their family watches the news regularly, whereas children from the favored school seem to learn political facts from other sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Watching news (Every day/often)</th>
<th>Rarely/never (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged</td>
<td>4,05 (N=46)</td>
<td>2,66 (N=15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favored school</td>
<td>6,70 (N=30)</td>
<td>6,44 (N=25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average (out of 15) to the knowledge test according to the pupil’s declaration of their family’s customs regarding news watching

By contrast, talking politics at home seems to have a broader impact on the favored school pupils\(^\text{11}\):
Talking politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Talking Politics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged</td>
<td>4.23 (N=13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favored</td>
<td>8.64 (N=11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.25 (24)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average (out of 15) to the knowledge test according to the pupil’s declaration of their hearing of political discussions

- Political context: the level of political knowledge held by individuals might vary in time: as an important part of it relates to recent events and present politicians, political knowledge needs to be frequently updated. Moreover, some middle-term memory knowledge might be forgotten if it has not been reminded in recent experience. The question of the persistency of specific knowledge and of the stability of global knowledge levels will be tested by comparing the results to the knowledge tests held during three consecutive years. As an important part of the children will be interviewed at least twice, it will allow both individual-level and group-level analysis in a diachronic perspective.

II. Methodological issues

Methodological issues concerning knowledge tests can basically be summarized in two questions: is the knowledge test valid, and is it reliable? (Leclercq 1987)

- Validity: does the test really measure what it’s supposed to measure, in our case children’s political knowledge? Validity refers both to the choice of the items (that must be representative of the knowledge area to be measured) and to the possible hidden variables that could interfere in the results: in our case, the main problem will be to determine whether we are not measuring school competence instead of political knowledge (Favre, Offerlé 2002).

- Reliability: are the rankings reliable, i.e. would they remain the same if the experience was redone in other conditions? Variables such as the context of administration, the formulation of the introduction speech, children’s tiredness etc. could weigh on the results. Moreover, reliability refers to whether all children who knew the answer to a question did pick the right answer, and whether those who didn’t could not possibly have found it by chance.
Several issues challenge both the validity and reliability of all knowledge tests, and these issues might be especially salient when children are being surveyed. For this reason, interrogating children can be considered as an interesting outset for the exploration of broader methodological difficulties.

1. School competence effects

The strong correlation between the children’s school competence and knowledge level raises important methodological issues. First, bad pupils might face difficulties with reading and understanding the questions as well as with writing the answers. This could explain, in part, why they tend to omit answering more often than the good pupils, even to questions about themselves or about their homes (although children globally tend to answer most questions, even when they visibly don’t understand them).

Average number of omissions to questions about daily life and family (out of 6 questions)

\[ N=116 \]

Moreover, school competence often seems to be related to the children’s perception of school: in general (although not always) good students will tend to like school more, and to appreciate reading, writing, and therefore answering a test. The questionnaire, filled up in the classroom during school time, individually and without talking, can appear much like a school exercise to the children. It seems that the vast majority of them are very pleased to answer the questionnaire (as I was told by the children themselves and by their teachers) for the simple reason that it breaks with the daily routine and as it can be seen as quite playful. The issue is
that it is highly probable that the better the pupils, the more they tend to appreciate the questionnaire: it generally requires less effort than for pupils facing difficulties that would find it hard to read the questions, and it globally falls within the scholar universe that good pupils are often more at ease with. One might therefore hypothesize that pupils facing difficulties will tend to answer with more haste and less diligence, which could artificially inflate the knowledge gap. This might be especially true for those who both have a low school level and a low knowledge level, who might find the whole questionnaire both difficult and out of interest for them.

This methodological issue is not specific to children. In any knowledge test (whether it is pen-and-pencil or phone interviews) some interviewees probably appreciate the test, seeing it as a game or as an opportunity to test their own knowledge. Interviewees might be curious about the questions, and see the overall utility of taking part in a research survey. Other interviewees on the contrary could find the testing situation distressing: it can remind them of unpleasant school-time experience, they can have the feeling that they are being judged, especially if there are many questions that they cannot answer to. The way interviewees experience the survey situation might influence their attentiveness and motivation. Moreover, interviewees that have been schooled long might have greater abilities to cope with a test situation and to scan their memory to find the right answer to a question. This means that all tests probably slightly over-estimate school-based knowledge inequalities. The issue is more salient with children because the test is passed on in school, and because the global writing and reading skills of children are lower than adults’, making the questionnaire more discriminating to them. On the other hand, children are used to answering tests, and the captive situation they are into when they answer the questionnaire makes them more likely to answer it up to the end (which they do with almost no exceptions). Moreover, contrary to adults children seem to the vast majority to enjoy answering the questionnaire and to be pleased to help.

In any case, this methodological issue is of great importance. Several efforts can be made to reduce the effects of school competence on the results, but in case of pen-and-pencil tests, one can assume that the effect will remain salient. This bias, however, can also be considered as a result in itself: efforts can therefore be made to measure it.

→ Efforts to minimize the educational effect on the testing method:

The knowledge test, placed at the end of the questionnaire, includes two types of questions that were chosen to be as accessible as possible to all pupils:
- The children are first asked to recognize 6 politicians from a photograph, in open questions (“who is he/she?”). This exercise can be thought to be more playful than direct questions. Moreover, it calls up a different kind of knowledge than direct questions, which requires reading and understanding. It can be expected that a child who recognizes a politician is very likely to make the effort to write his or her name down. Furthermore, some children may be able to recognize politicians after seeing them several times on TV even though they would have been incapable of citing them in an open question.

- The children are then asked a series of multiple-choice questions, relating to institutions, politicians and political parties. This kind of exercise does not require as much effort as open questions, as they require no writing. Moreover, closed-questions can be seen as more reliable when measuring knowledge, as in case of partial knowledge all interviewees would pick the right answers, whereas to a similar degree of knowledge some would have omitted to answer an open question (Mondak 2001). Except when images were provided, open questions were avoided at maximum (only one remained, concerning the city mayor, for the simple reason that all children do not live in the same city).

Whatever the efforts, it is highly probable that this kind of tests, especially when administered in class situation, have a discriminatory effect according to school competence. Efforts consequently need to be done to measure to what extent the results are biased by this variable.

→ **Efforts to measure the school competence effect on the reliability of answers:**

- First, the knowledge test comes at the end of a series of questions, a lot of which comprising a “don’t know” (DK) box. To many of these (those that cannot be considered intrusive or possibly confusing), there is no reason that the children should omit to answer. Omissions could be interpreted in three ways: either the children missed the question; or they did not understand its meaning (in this case they should answer DK, but some children might find it inappropriate because if they do not understand the question they cannot be sure whether they really do not know the answer to it); or they were not very attentive and motivated to answer the questionnaire. Whatever the interpretation, a high omission rate in the first part of the questionnaire would tend to lower the reliability of the knowledge test, because omissions could not be fully interpreted as the result of the absence of knowledge.

- Moreover, a placebo question was added into the knowledge test so as to check whether children do read and answer all the questions they can. All children are supposed to be able to give the right answer to the question (“What is the capital of France? Tokyo / Paris / New
York”). An omission to this question would be interpreted as a sign that the child either missed it (involuntary omission) or did not feel like answering it (voluntary omission). Wrong answers would be seen either as an involuntary writing mistake (the child meant to choose the right answer but opted for the wrong box) or as a voluntary mistake (the child consciously gave wrong answers to at least part of the questionnaire). The possibility that the French-speaking or reading skills of some children are insufficient for them to understand the question must also be taken into account, in which case their answers to the whole questionnaire should not be considered as valid. Although it will never be possible to affirm that the children voluntarily failed, it will make possible to differentiate between children who really have a low political knowledge level (who would answer this question right and most others wrong) and those who did not answer the test seriously (who would answer most question wrong including this one). Many cases might remain unclear, but most should be enlightened by looking at other easy questions of the questionnaire: the knowledge grade of children who tend to omit answering a large part of these questions will be considered unreliable. In summary, this placebo question will be useful in two ways: it will allow eliminating all knowledge tests that have not been answered with enough diligence to be considered as reliable, and it will allow measuring their number and eventual correlation with variables such as gender or school competence.

2. The guessing issue:

Multiple-choice questions can be seen as less reliable as open questions because they give interviewees the chance to guess (Delli Carpini, Keeter 1993). When the standard ranking is used (DKs and wrong answers graded 0, right answers graded 1), the expected score for guessing is 0.33 points per question, as all items have three possible answers. Moreover, guessing is not always at random: children might be able to eliminate one of the three answers to some of the questions, and would therefore only guess between two possibilities (the expected score then levels up to 0.5 points). As a consequence, multiple-choice questions always produce over-estimations of the knowledge levels. Another possible notation would be to grade wrong answers -1, so as to penalize guessing. However this notation assumes that all wrong answers are blind-guesses, while they might be honest mistakes, either because test-takers are misinformed or because they are “almost sure” of an answer and decide to bet on it.
The problem concerning guessing is that interviewees do not all make the same use of it: some will always try to guess when they ignore an answer while others will never do it. This has long been analyzed as an effect of personality (taking risks, self-confidence, etc.). However some recent studies have shown that these “personality” traits are strongly correlated to social characteristics. The works of Chiche and Haegel (2002) and Mondak (2004) suggest that women tend to choose the DK option more often than men to an equal level of knowledge, which tends to overestimate the gender gap in political knowledge: when eliminating the DK option from the tests and encouraging interviewees to guess, the gap narrows significantly: according to Mondak “the evidence suggests that the tendency of men to provide substantive answers rather than DKs possibly inflates their knowledge scores by a margin large enough to account for approximately half of the observed gender gap” (2004, p.503). One of the solutions Mondak offers to reduce the bias is to discourage DKs (which simply means to take them off when pen-and-pencil tests are concerned) and to encourage guessing by preliminary speeches so as to reduce this methodological bias: as some interviewees will tend to guess whatever the efforts to discourage it, it is more reliable to make them all guess.

This unequal tendency to guess might be due to socialization that might be “inviting men to “shout out the answers” while encouraging women to “sit in the back and keep quiet.”” (Mondak 2004, p. 493): during childhood, individuals might internalize diffuse gender roles, notably in the perception of knowledge. Boys might be more encouraged to show off their abilities and discouraged to admit when they do not know, which might partly explain their larger tendency to guess. In turn, this different relation to testing situations might favor boys’ further acquisition of knowledge and explain in part the reminding gender gap. Whatever the sense of the causality, Mondak has clearly shown that knowledge tests put forward important methodological biases that deserve attention. It is indeed probable that gender is not the only variable that favors guessing, although it might be the most salient one.

It seems interesting to test these results on children, in order both to re-evaluate the results if needed but also because this unequal propensity to guess would be a result in itself. In order to do so, two different versions of the questionnaire are handed out in each class: half of the pupils get a questionnaire where all multiple-choice questions have a DK square, and half where they do not. A different sentence introduces each version in order to encourage or discourage guessing.

This technique will make it possible to check whether discouraging DKs enhances the global level of knowledge from more than the expected score, which would mean that an
important part of the interviewee chose DK while they have at least partial knowledge on the question asked. It will also make possible to measure correlations between this propensity to guess and other variables such as gender, school competence, but also the global level of knowledge or the propensity to give one’s opinion.

III. Political knowledge as a resource

In the study, political knowledge is seen both as a consequence of socialization and as a cause of further politicization, and must therefore be understood as both a result and a resource. Beyond measuring political knowledge on children, this study aims at evaluating the consequences of knowledge inequalities: the measurement of knowledge is more considered as a mean for understanding other behaviors rather than as an end. I would like here to detail the way I plan to mobilize the knowledge level into the broader study of children’s socialization.

1. Theoretical implications of political knowledge

Political knowledge has been suspected to promote a normative outsight of citizenship and to establish a symbolic hierarchy between citizens according to criterions that reflect a dominating view on politics. In short, political knowledge is often studied as a quality to be requested from good citizens. Recent political science has shown that many tools are available for ordinary citizens to understand politics even though they have a weak knowledge level (such as heuristics, shortcuts, cognitions, etc.), which tends to nuance the importance of political knowledge to democracy (see for example Sniderman 1998 ; Tiberj 2004 ; Joignant 2004 ; Gaxie 2007) and which can lead to question the scientific pertinence of the notion (Sadoun 2007). Without denying that ordinary relations to politics do not exclusively feed on technical knowledge, the knowledge level seems to be relevant for different reasons:

- « The problem does not lie so much in the statement that individuals are in general weakly informed, but rather in the statement that this information is unequally distributed among the different groups of the population » (Blondiaux 2007, p.771, my translation). To a macro level, this knowledge inequality is one of the elements that legitimate the domination of the most educated part of the population. To a micro level, technical knowledge gives social
legitimacy to political discourses and discriminates socially-dominant forms of politicization. In that, knowledge level gives individuals an unequal feeling of legitimacy to give their opinion, as we will see below (Gaxie 2007).

- Political knowledge level weighs on the tendency to pay attention to political information given out in the media and to memorize them (Zaller 1992, p.18), but also the tendency to participate, particularly to elections: « statistically, political competence has to do with action » (Blondiaux 2007, my translation). Moreover, political knowledge acts as a tool for making sense of political information: “political knowledge does not determine whether citizens can make reasoned decisions, but it does determine how new information is incorporated into their evaluations. While the ability to use information shortcuts restores to citizens much of the credit they lose whenever their factual knowledge is examined, basic political knowledge structures the kinds of inferences that citizens make about the world” (Popkin, Dimock 1999 p.118).

- The mobilization of a more or less important set of knowledge seems to be a discriminating element of the way individuals evaluate the political universe (Sniderman 1998). It seems impossible to understand the basic issues of the political sphere without having at least a minimal knowledge of the way it is organized.

- Finally, political knowledge level acts as a clue of socialization processes: one can admit that individuals are born with no political knowledge and reach adulthood with at least rudimental information about their government system. In children specifically, measuring the political knowledge level is an indication of their exposition to political messages and of their cognitive treatment of this information.

Admitting that political knowledge is a pertinent notion for evaluating the individual relation to politics does not imply that it must be studied in normative views. Political knowledge is a symptom of differential appreciations of the political universe, i.e. the degree to which individuals master the dominant way of considering politics. Because researchers themselves often share this dominant relation to politics, they tend to valorize it as being the “good”, “right” way of doing politics in somewhat normative and scholar ethnocentric views.

2. Political knowledge and opinion-making

Political knowledge will be studied as a component of political competence, which can be defined as the ability to make reasoned judgments about the political universe. In children, I will be especially interested in finding correlations between political knowledge and opinion-making: do the best-informed children tend to give their opinion more willingly than others?
Do they have greater abilities to explain their opinion with coherent arguments? Such a correlation was clearly found in the preliminary study:

![Graph showing correlation between knowledge test and substantive answers to opinion questions](image)

*Correlation between the knowledge test and the tendency to give substantive answers to opinion questions (questions requiring technical knowledge have been excluded)*

This correlation was also confirmed by qualitative analysis: children with high knowledge levels tended to give more substantive political arguments than those with low knowledge levels. This correlation can be explained by several factors: first, it is highly probable that these results are mainly influenced by common variables weighing both on political knowledge and on opinion-making, as for example the interest for politics or the level of politicization of the children’s families. Moreover, it can be assumed that children who have rich political knowledge have had the opportunity to think about politics more than others. Knowledge rarely comes alone: political facts seem to be learned altogether with normative beliefs. With children, making a distinction between knowledge and opinion might be irrelevant: when answering an opinion question, they often seem to recall arguments heard

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6 to 11 questions were included, according to the children’s knowledge:
- Who would you have voted for at the Presidential election? François Hollande / Nicolas Sarkozy / I don’t know
- Do you think children should have the right to vote? Yes/no/I don’t know
- France is a rich country : I agree / I disagree / I don’t know
- It’s important to vote : I agree / I disagree / I don’t know
- Politicians can be trusted : I agree / I disagree / I don’t know
- The Police does protect citizens : I agree / I disagree / I don’t know
- Children had to write the name of 5 politicians out of images. When they did recognize the politician, they were asked whether they liked or disliked them. The percentage of substantive answers to opinion questions only takes into account, for each child, the politicians he or she has recognized.
in their environment. Opinion questions might as well be considered as indirect knowledge questions: the question may often not be “what do I think about this issue” but rather “what am I supposed to think about this issue” or even “what argument could I use to answer this question”. As Zaller (1992, p.37) states, “when asked a survey question, [citizens] call to mind as many of these ideas as are immediately accessible in memory and use them to make choices among the options offered to them. But they make these choices in great haste – typically on the basis of the one or perhaps two considerations that happen to be at the “top of the head” at the moment of the response”. In the interviews it was found that children often justify their opinion by mentioning one member of their family as a source of legitimacy. This translated extract from an interview with a 10 years-old girl from the disadvantaged school clearly illustrates this statement:

- Who would you have voted for [at the Presidential elections]?
- I rather vote François Hollande, because my mother she has voted [for him]...
- You think she’s right?
- But then I saw that he didn’t keep his promises!
- For example what promises didn’t he keep?
- Er... unemployment... and then... I don’t remember.

Some might argue that we are not in the presence of what can be called an opinion in such situations where interviewees repeat snippets of opinions heard in their environment. Because children often mention who they got their opinions from, they are often suspected of senseless psittacism. Rayou states that interrogating children about political news is useless because they “only deliver statements that are directly reproduced from their adult relatives” (Rayou 2000 p.144, my translation). On the opposite, one could argue that this reaction of children significantly enlightens the steps of political socialization: it seems that at first, the formulation of opinions is often made of a repetition of others’ opinions, which are progressively internalized, rationalized, but also put into perspective or completed by newer information. The fact that they repeat others’ opinions might not show that children do not have opinions but rather that they are working on developing them. However, asking such direct and intimidating questions is indeed not appropriate if one tries to understand children’s representations on these topics: the opinions that are formulated in such discussions are probably artificial and must be understood as a consequence of the interview situation. Moreover, it seems that this tendency to repeat is not specific to children: any opinion includes some degree of repetition, which can be more or less interiorized (and therefore dissimulated) according to individual political competence about the topic being discussed.
The correlation between the political knowledge level and the valorization of the democratic system noted by many authors (see for example Elkin, Soltan 1999; Galston 2001; Milner 2007 and when children are concerned Wessa 2013) is often considered as a causality bond making knowledge an ingredient of good citizenship (i.e. to the acquisition of democratic values). Without denying that knowledgeable citizens tend to be those who meet the expectancies of good citizenship, one could make the hypothesis that it is not only knowledge that enhances democratic values, but also the opposite: social environments in which democracy and politics are well-liked might produce far more opportunities and incentives to political learning than skeptical environments. Moreover, it is likely that values, just as knowledge but through a more diffuse process, are being learnt from exterior information. When learning knowledge, individuals might not only learn factual knowledge, but also normative beliefs that are associated to it when they acquire it. When children at least are concerned, it is probable that the ingredients that favor opinion-making are the same than those favoring political knowledge.

Moreover, it is possible that the possession of political knowledge level in itself could enhance opinion-making about politics: the sense of legitimacy, often considered in adults as being a result of the symbolic status (i.e. the subjective perception of the individual’s position on the social ladder), could also be enhanced by technical knowledge. Children who feel that they are “aware” of politics could, especially when discussing in the presence of other children, feel more confident to give out their opinions. On the opposite, children with a very weak political knowledge level might feel uncomfortable with delivering any type of political opinion, because they might feel incompetent for doing so. I will be especially interested in exploring this sense of legitimacy: when facing opinion questions, interviewees sometimes state their weak political knowledge as a justification of their absence of elaborated opinions. Children in particular might find that politics is not of their matter. Several questions in the survey aim to measure this: among them the question “politics is too complicated for children: I agree / I disagree / DK” and several questions on their interest for politics (in detail: for the news, for politics, for the questionnaire). Moreover, this interrogation on the sense of legitimacy is mainly explored through interviews and focus groups.

**Conclusion**

The measure of children’s political knowledge can be considered as a tool for understanding the roots of the inequalities in political awareness and political competence that
are commonly found in adults: it is both an entrée for exploring collective environment-based inequalities and an indication of the individual perception on the political universe. Moreover, studying children raises major methodological issues that are probably sharper than when studying adults, yet not different in nature: children tend to be intimidated by the interview situation, especially because of the symbolic domination between adults and children; their reading, writing and discussing skills are generally incomplete; and they do not always provide true answers to basic questions. All these issues are also met with adults, especially with the least educated and the least sophisticated ones. For this reason, the methodological issues met with children can be seen as an opportunity to engage a thought on the possible biases concerning the measurement of political knowledge but also concerning interviews about politics.

Studying children allows inserting the study of political knowledge in the broader study of political socialization: the acquisition of a basic set of knowledge can indeed be considered as a first step in the development of individual relationship to the political universe. It is inconceivable that a child may have any elaborated opinion about politics unless he or she masters at least basic knowledge elements on the system of government and the main oppositions structuring it. This statement does not necessarily imply that knowledge comes before opinion: on the contrary, the hypothesis will be made that knowledge often comes with opinion, i.e. with normative beliefs associated to the piece of knowledge in question. As an example, children who learn what an election is and its purpose might learn by the same way that elections are positive and important events. Moreover, some opinions might come before knowledge: the works of Lignier and Pagis (2013) have shown that some children could state that they liked or disliked the right or left wing before they understood any of the issues that are associated. It is probable that these children will progressively learn the meanings of these words and become capable of explaining their position (and eventually to change it according to future socialization).

Political knowledge can therefore be considered as a tool among others for making sense of the political universe, a tool that deserves particular attention both because it is representative of broader social and political inequalities and because it has great chance to determine further ones.
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**Appendix:** approximate translation of this year’s knowledge test (answers in italics/highlighted). The “I don’t know” option is available on half of the questionnaires only.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Who is he?</th>
<th>What is his job?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="François Hollande" /></td>
<td>President François Hollande</td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Manuel Valls" /></td>
<td>Manuel Valls, Prime Minister</td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Marine Le Pen" /></td>
<td>Marine Le Pen, President of the Front National party</td>
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<td><img src="image" alt="Nicolas Sarkozy" /></td>
<td>Former President Nicolas Sarkozy</td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Barack Obama" /></td>
<td>Barack Obama</td>
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What is the name of the Prime minister in France?  
☐ Jacques Chirac ☐ Manuel Valls ☐ François Fillon ☐ I don’t know

What is the name of the President of Russia?  
☐ Hugo Chavez ☐ Garry Kasparov ☐ George Bush ☐ I don’t know

What is the name of your city’s mayor? ............................................................  

deputées ministers journalists I don’t know

Who work at the Assemblée Nationale?  

deputées ministers journalists I don’t know

Who is Nicolas Sarkozy?  
☐ a minister ☐ a former President ☐ a deputée I don’t know

Who is currently ruling France?  
☐ A left-wing President ☐ a moderate President ☐ a left-wing President ☐ DK

What is the capital of France? ☐ Tokyo ☐ Paris ☐ New-York ☐ I don’t know

What is the Front National?  
☐ a rock band ☐ a newspaper ☐ a political party I don’t know

What election has been held in France in March?  
☐ the presidential election ☐ the European election ☐ the city-council election I don’t know