

Naming *Handicap* in French Legal and Educational Policy Discourse: Accessibility Governance and Deficit Framing

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Abstract

This article examines how French *handicap*-related categories are mobilized in legal and educational policy discourse to organize access to rights, compensation, and inclusion. Rather than treating naming as a purely linguistic issue, the study approaches it as a discursive mechanism of institutional categorization and accessibility governance, understood here as the discursive and administrative processes through which institutions identify barriers, classify needs, allocate forms of support, and regulate access to rights and educational participation. The corpus combines three French laws on disability and social rights, adopted in 1957, 1975, and 2005, with ministerial and administrative texts on inclusive education and educational difference spanning 2004 to the present, with particular attention to the policy framework developed since 2013. The analysis preserves key French formulations, including *handicap*, *handicaper*, *compensation*, *école inclusive*, and *besoins éducatifs spécifiques*, while providing working translations for international readers. Drawing on lexical and discourse analysis, the article investigates terminological series, definitional procedures, classificatory lists, syntactic constructions, and implicit presuppositions. The analysis shows how the semantic flexibility of *handicap* enables its analogical use beyond its medico-legal meaning, while broader educational categories bring disability-related, linguistic, and socioeconomic disadvantages into a shared institutional framework of needs and support. These discursive operations are ambivalent: they can legitimize access to rights and compensatory measures while making deficit-oriented interpretations of linguistic and social difference institutionally available. The article argues that institutional naming shapes the conditions under which learner diversity becomes visible, actionable, and administratively governable.

Keywords: *handicap*, institutional discourse, inclusive education, accessibility governance, categorization, deficit framing, special educational needs, French education policy

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is often presented as a normative and political response to exclusion. Critical work on inclusion has also shown that inclusive policy may reproduce exclusionary arrangements when institutional categories and school norms remain unexamined (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2011). In international frameworks, it is associated with the right of all learners to participate in ordinary educational settings, regardless of disability, language, social background, or other forms of vulnerability. Yet inclusion does not operate only through legal principles or pedagogical reforms. It also operates through language. Before a learner can be supported, accommodated, compensated, or administratively recognized, the learner must be named, categorized, and made visible within institutional discourse.

This article examines this discursive dimension of inclusion through the French case. It focuses on the institutional naming of *handicap* in French legal and educational policy texts and asks how this term, together with related categories such as *handicapé*, *travailleur handicapé*, *personne en situation de handicap*, *élèves à besoins éducatifs spécifiques*, *compensation*, *école inclusive*, and *élève allophone*, participates in the governance of educational difference. The central hypothesis is that the naming of *handicap* does not merely describe pre-existing social realities. It contributes to organizing them by producing categories through which rights, needs, and forms of intervention become administratively intelligible. This study refers to this process as accessibility governance. The term designates the discursive and administrative organization of access through which institutions identify barriers, categorize needs and differences, attach rights or compensatory measures to those categories, and regulate the conditions under which learners become eligible for institutional support. Accessibility governance is therefore not used here as a synonym for accessibility itself, but as an analytical concept for examining how accessibility is institutionally organized through acts of naming, classification, and intervention. In this study, *allophone* and *allophony* are used as analytical terms referring to students whose linguistic repertoires differ from the language expectations of French schooling. When discussing the 2009 inspection report, the article retains the historical institutional designation *élèves nouvellement arrivés en France* and its reference to newly arrived non-French-speaking students.

The French case is particularly relevant because it combines a strong legal tradition of categorization with a recent policy emphasis on inclusive schooling. In the legal field, the category of *handicap* has been progressively stabilized through major laws, especially the 1957 law on the reclassification of disabled workers, the 1975 framework law in favor of disabled persons, and the 2005 law on equal rights and opportunities, participation, and citizenship of disabled persons. In the educational field, the 2013 refoundation law introduced and consolidated the principle of *école inclusive*. Since then, ministerial texts have increasingly relied on categories such as *école inclusive*, *élèves en situation de handicap*, *élèves à besoins éducatifs spécifiques*, and *mesures de compensation*.

The article does not aim to evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive education policies in

classroom practices. Nor does it claim to observe how teachers, support workers, families, or students appropriate institutional categories in everyday interaction. Its object is more specific: the article analyzes the discursive frames through which French institutions define, extend, and govern *handicap*-related categories in educational discourse. The effects examined here are therefore effects of framing, categorization, and presupposition, not empirically demonstrated effects on school practices.

The research questions are the following: how is the French term *handicap* named, defined, and institutionally stabilized in legal discourse? How is this legal category reconfigured in French school policy discourse? How do the lexicon of inclusion and compensation, together with broader educational categories, enable analogical uses of *handicap* and the institutional classification of linguistic and socioeconomic disadvantage?

The article contributes to discourse studies and sociolinguistics in three ways. First, it shows that disability naming is not a peripheral lexical issue but a central mechanism of institutional categorization. Second, it connects French educational discourse to broader international frameworks on disability, accessibility, and inclusion, while showing the specificity of French administrative categories. Third, it argues that inclusive discourse is ambivalent: it enables rights and support, but it may also transform structural inequalities into individualized deficits. Blanchet (2021, pp. 56-58) has previously examined the institutional discourse of inclusion through, among other examples, formulations concerning newly arrived non-French-speaking students, socioeconomic disadvantage, and special educational needs. The present study develops a distinct analytical perspective by situating these formulations within the historical construction of *handicap* in French law, examining their lexical and syntactic organization, and distinguishing analogical uses of disability terminology from broader administrative processes of educational categorization. The concept of accessibility governance is proposed to account for the relationship between these processes and the institutional organization of access and support.

2. Disability, Accessibility, and Institutional Categorization

In line with sociolinguistic approaches that treat language as inseparable from social organization (Calvet, 2024), this article considers institutional categories as social facts produced and circulated through discourse. The analysis draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives: the sociology of naming, discourse analysis, and disability studies. In sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, naming is not understood as a neutral act of reference. Naming selects a point of view, constructs a category, and gives that category a certain degree of social reality. Siblot (2001) distinguishes denomination from nomination by emphasizing the enunciative and social dimensions of naming. Calabrese Steimberg (2012) similarly argues that naming is an act through which media and institutional discourse make social objects recognizable and debatable.

This perspective is close to Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power. For Bourdieu (2001), institutional acts of naming classify individuals and assign them positions in the social world. A name does not simply identify; it authorizes, legitimizes, and constrains. Naming is therefore linked to acts of institution. It tells subjects what they are for the institution and

what kinds of conduct, rights, or expectations are attached to that designation. Koren (1996) also shows that public denominations often condense implicit arguments, while Boutet (2016) insists that words create categories of thought that orient our perception of social reality. Blanchet (2017) similarly shows that political and institutional terminology may impose interpretive frames while presenting them as self-evident lexical choices.

From a discourse-analytical perspective, these processes can be studied through lexical series, definitional formulas, classification procedures, and implicit presuppositions. Charaudeau and Maingueneau (2002) define discourse analysis as a way of examining the relationship between linguistic forms, social practices, and institutional positions. Boutet and Demazière (2011) underline the methodological importance of studying discourse not merely as language, but as socially situated activity. In this sense, the present article treats legal and educational texts as institutional discourses that both reflect and produce social classifications.

A key analytical concept used in this study is Blanchet's notion of the *préimposé* (Blanchet, 2018, 2021). The term refers to meanings and interpretive frames that discourse presents not as propositions to be argued for, but as already established, shared, and therefore largely removed from explicit discussion. In this sense, *préimposé* is used here as a discourse-analytical concept rather than as a synonym for presupposition in the narrower formal-semantic sense. Analytically, it makes it possible to identify the background norms that institutional formulations treat as self-evident and on the basis of which categories such as *besoin*, *difficulté*, *compensation*, or *handicap* become intelligible. In the corpus examined here, a *préimposé* is therefore identified when a formulation presupposes a norm of linguistic competence, educational participation, family resources, or learner adequacy without explicitly arguing for that norm. In the field of inclusive education, such presuppositions are crucial. Thus, when an institutional text refers to *besoins éducatifs spécifiques*, *compensation*, or *la situation de nouvel arrivant non francophone qui handicape l'élève*, it does more than describe a condition: it also presupposes a normative framework within which that condition can appear as a need, a lack, an obstacle, or a deviation from an expected school norm.

The article also draws on disability studies. The social model of disability, associated with the work of Oliver (1990), shifted attention from individual impairment to social barriers. Disability is not reducible to bodily or cognitive impairment; it is also produced by inaccessible environments, institutional norms, and social exclusion. Later work in disability studies, such as Shakespeare (2006) and Goodley (2017), has complicated the opposition between medical and social models by showing that disability is produced through the interaction of bodies, environments, institutions, and cultural meanings.

This interactional perspective is also central to the World Health Organization's *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health*, which describes functioning and disability in relation to health conditions, activities, participation, and environmental factors (World Health Organization, 2001). A comparable shift is visible in international legal and policy frameworks. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines inclusive education as a right and insists on reasonable accommodation and equal access (United Nations, 2006). UNESCO's *Global Education Monitoring Report*

on inclusion and education further emphasizes that inclusive education should respond to learner diversity rather than treating diversity as a problem to be corrected (UNESCO, 2020).

However, institutional discourse often translates this relational approach into administrative categories. Terms such as *accessibilité*, *inclusion*, *compensation*, and *école inclusive* do not function only as emancipatory principles; they also become technologies of governance. They make certain differences visible, measurable, classifiable, and actionable. The notion of accessibility governance does not refer here to accessibility as a normative objective in itself. It designates the discursive and administrative operations through which accessibility is institutionally organized: identifying who is considered to require access, defining what counts as a barrier or need, classifying differences as *handicap*, *besoin*, *difficulté*, or another administratively recognizable category, and determining which rights, accommodations, or forms of intervention become legitimate. The concept therefore draws attention to the classificatory work that accompanies the institutional production of accessibility.

3. Corpus and Methodology

The corpus consists of two sets of French institutional texts. The first is a legal corpus composed of three major laws that played a central role in the historical construction of *handicap* as a legal category in France:

1. *Loi n° 57-1223 du 23 novembre 1957 sur le reclassement des travailleurs handicapés* [Law No. 57-1223 of 23 November 1957 on the reclassification of disabled workers];
2. *Loi n° 75-534 du 30 juin 1975 d'orientation en faveur des personnes handicapées* [Law No. 75-534 of 30 June 1975 in favor of disabled persons];
3. *Loi n° 2005-102 du 11 février 2005 pour l'égalité des droits et des chances, la participation et la citoyenneté des personnes handicapées* [Law No. 2005-102 of 11 February 2005 on equal rights and opportunities, participation, and citizenship of disabled persons].

These texts were selected because each marks a stage in the legal stabilization of *handicap* and related categories in French institutional discourse. The 1957 law institutionalizes the category *travailleur handicapé*. The 1975 law broadens *handicap* into a matter of national solidarity, social integration, education, work, and access to leisure. The 2005 law introduces an explicit legal definition of *handicap* in French law and articulates *limitation d'activité*, *restriction de participation*, *altération*, and *environnement*.

The second sub-corpus consists of educational, ministerial, and inspection documents relevant to the institutional construction of inclusive schooling and educational difference. The documentary sources span the period from 2004 to 2026, with particular attention to the policy framework established from 2013 onward. The online ministerial and Éduscol pages were considered in the versions available at the time of corpus compilation. The pre-2013 documents are retained because they provide important institutional antecedents for categories and formulations subsequently incorporated into the discourse of inclusive education. The 2013 education law is treated as a contextual legal source for the educational sub-corpus, since it institutionalizes the policy framework within which the lexicon of *école inclusive* becomes central. This period is significant because the 2013 law on the

refoundation of the school system introduced the principle of inclusive schooling into the French Code of Education. The corpus includes ministerial pages, policy documents, inspection reports, and administrative texts addressing *école inclusive*, *élèves en situation de handicap*, *mesures de compensation*, and *élèves à besoins éducatifs spécifiques*. More specifically, the educational sub-corpus includes six identifiable sources: the 2014 ministerial dossier *L'École inclusive: Une dynamique qui s'amplifie en faveur des élèves et des étudiants en situation de handicap*; the 2009 inspection report *La scolarisation des élèves nouvellement arrivés en France*; the 2015 inspection report *Grande pauvreté et réussite scolaire: Le choix de la solidarité pour la réussite de tous*; the archived ministerial dossier *L'enseignement pour les élèves à besoins éducatifs spécifiques – dossiers documentaires*, used for the institutional formulation of *besoins éducatifs spécifiques*; the current Ministry page on *élèves à besoins éducatifs particuliers*; and the current Éduscol page on *école inclusive*. The educational documents were selected purposively rather than as an exhaustive sample of French educational policy discourse. Selection was based on their institutional provenance and on their relevance to three analytical dimensions central to this study: the formulation of inclusive schooling, the administrative categorization of educational needs, and the discursive treatment of linguistic or socioeconomic disadvantage. The corpus is therefore theoretically delimited: its purpose is not to represent statistically all French educational-policy documents, but to examine institutionally salient formulations in which naming, classification, accessibility, and compensation become explicit.

Table 1 presents the key excerpts selected for close analysis.

Table 1. Key Institutional Formulations Analyzed

Source	Original French formulation	Working translation
Law No. 57-1223 of 23 November 1957	<i>Loi n° 57-1223 du 23 novembre 1957 sur le reclassement des travailleurs handicapés.</i>	“Law No. 57-1223 of 23 November 1957 on the reclassification of disabled workers.”
Law No. 75-534 of 30 June 1975	<i>La prévention et le dépistage des handicaps, les soins, l'éducation, la formation et l'orientation professionnelle, l'emploi, la garantie d'un minimum de ressources, l'intégration sociale et l'accès aux sports et aux loisirs du mineur et de l'adulte handicapés physiques, sensoriels ou mentaux constituent une obligation nationale.</i>	“The prevention and screening of disabilities, care, education, training and vocational guidance, employment, the guarantee of minimum resources, social integration and access to sports and leisure for minors and adults with physical, sensory, or mental disabilities constitute a national obligation.”
Law No. 2005-102 of 11 February 2005	<i>Constitue un handicap, au sens de la présente loi, toute limitation d'activité ou restriction de participation à la vie en société subie dans son environnement par une personne en raison d'une altération substantielle, durable ou définitive [...]</i>	“Within the meaning of this law, disability is any limitation of activity or restriction of participation in social life experienced in one's environment by a person because of a substantial, lasting or definitive impairment [...].”
Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, 2014, PDF p. 4 - <i>L'École inclusive - Plan d'accompagnement personnalisé (PAP)</i>	<i>Ces mesures permettent une prise en compte au plus près des besoins des élèves [...]</i>	“These measures allow for closer attention to students' needs [...].”
Klein & Sallé, 2009, <i>La scolarisation des élèves nouvellement arrivés en</i>	<i>De manière analogique, on peut considérer que [...] la situation de nouvel arrivant non francophone qui</i>	“By analogy, it may be considered that [...] the situation of being a newly arrived non-French-speaking

<i>France</i> , p. 131	<i>handicape l'élève [...] lui crée un droit [...]</i>	student, which handicaps the student, [...] creates an entitlement [...].”
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AFEV (2014), quoted in Delahaye (2015, p. 37)	<i>Les enfants des secteurs de l'éducation prioritaire peuvent beaucoup moins que les autres compter sur leur environnement familial pour leur permettre de s'ouvrir au monde.</i>	“Children in priority education areas can rely much less than others on their family environment to enable them to open up to the world.”
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Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, 2004, p. 1 - <i>L'enseignement pour les élèves à besoins éducatifs spécifiques - dossiers documentaires</i>	<i>Cette notion concerne, en effet, une vaste population d'élèves aux besoins différents.</i>	“This notion concerns a broad population of students with different needs.”
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Note. The English translations are working translations provided for readability. They are not treated as the object of analysis. The analysis focuses on the original French formulations, since the lexical, syntactic, and institutional values of terms such as *handicap*, *handicaper*, *compensation*, *inclusion*, *école inclusive*, and *besoins éducatifs spécifiques* cannot be fully captured by English equivalents.

The excerpts selected for close analysis were chosen because they contain explicit acts of definition, classification, or semantic extension. They do not exhaust the corpus, but they represent particularly salient moments in which *handicap*-related categories become legally definable, educationally actionable, or discursively extended to linguistic and social disadvantage. For this reason, the original French wording is retained throughout the analysis whenever the linguistic form itself is analytically relevant.

The study is qualitative and interpretive. It combines lexical and discourse analysis in order to identify the forms through which *handicap* is named, classified, and extended. The analysis proceeds at four levels.

First, it examines terminological series: *handicap*, *handicapé(s)*, *travailleur(s) handicapé(s)*, *personne(s) en situation de handicap*, *élève(s) en situation de handicap*, *élèves à besoins éducatifs spécifiques*, *compensation*, *école inclusive*, *inclusion*, *limitation*, *restriction*, *altération*, *participation*, and *environnement*.

Second, it studies definitional procedures, especially formulas such as *au sens de la présente loi*, which explicitly delimit the legal meaning of *handicap*.

Third, it examines classificatory lists. Such lists are particularly important in institutional discourse because they bring heterogeneous situations under a single administrative category.

Fourth, it analyzes presuppositions and deficit frames. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which linguistic or socioeconomic disadvantage may be represented as an individual lack or obstacle, even when it results from structural conditions.

Because the corpus is institutional, the study does not claim to describe the actual practices of teachers, students, families, or school support professionals. Rather, it analyzes the categories made available by public discourse and the interpretive frames through which educational differences become governable. Accordingly, the analysis makes claims about institutional representations, categorizations, and available interpretive frames, not about their actual reception, appropriation, or effects in classroom interaction.

4. Legal Stabilization of *Handicap* in French Law

The legal naming of *handicap* in France is inseparable from the history of assistance, work, rehabilitation, administrative recognition, and social rights (Renard-Munier, 2021; Rossignol, 2002; Stiker, 2005; Rabischong, 2018). *Handicap* became legally visible through a gradual process of administrative recognition that did not merely reflect social concern for vulnerable individuals, but also produced a lexicon through which disability-related situations could be identified, classified, and managed.

The 1957 law on the reclassification of disabled workers is a decisive moment in this process. Its importance lies in the stabilization of the French categories *handicapés* and *travailleurs handicapés*. The latter expression is not a purely descriptive label: it links *handicap* to employability, rehabilitation, and professional orientation. The person is recognized through a work-related category and becomes administratively visible insofar as he or she requires reclassification, training, or adapted placement. The lexical field of the 1957 law is therefore organized around work, capacity, adaptation, reclassification, and orientation.

The 1975 law broadens the legal and semantic field of *handicap*. It presents *prévention*, *dépistage*, *soins*, *éducation*, *formation*, *orientation professionnelle*, *emploi*, *garantie d'un minimum de ressources*, *intégration sociale*, and *accès* as matters of national obligation. This cumulative nominal series is significant. It constructs *handicap* as a transversal public issue rather than as a strictly medical condition. At the same time, the law maintains a medico-classificatory lexicon by referring to *handicapés physiques*, *sensoriels ou mentaux*. *Handicap* is therefore positioned at the intersection of medical classification and social responsibility.

This dual construction is typical of institutional discourse on *handicap*. On the one hand, the category opens access to rights and support. On the other hand, access depends on administrative recognition. The person must be classified in order to benefit from public action. The act of naming thus becomes a condition of rights.

The 2005 law constitutes a major turning point because it introduces an explicit definition of *handicap* in French law. The definition opens with the formula « *constitue un handicap, au*

sens de la présente loi ». This metalinguistic sequence is crucial: the law does not merely use the word *handicap*; it explicitly fixes its legal meaning. The expression *au sens de la présente loi* gives the text definitional authority and delimits the official scope of the category. The definition then relies on a nominal series including *limitation d'activité*, *restriction de participation*, *participation*, *altération*, *fonctions*, *trouble*, and *environnement*. This lexicon produces a depersonalized and generalizable definition of *handicap*. At the same time, the phrase « *subie dans son environnement* » introduces a relational dimension: *handicap* is not defined only as an individual impairment, but as a situation involving participation and environment. This formulation resonates with the social model of disability and with the ICF framework, in which functioning and disability are understood in relation to contextual and environmental factors (World Health Organization, 2001).

At the same time, the legal definition remains ambivalent. It introduces environment into the definition, but it continues to rely on a list of individual alterations. The category is therefore both relational and deficit-oriented. This duality is crucial for understanding later educational discourse. When the lexicon of *handicap* enters the school system, it carries with it both a rights-based logic and a classificatory logic.

5. From *Handicap* Rights to Accessibility Governance in School Policy

In French educational discourse, the term *handicap* circulates within a policy field increasingly structured by *inclusion*. The idea of inclusive schooling became central after the 2013 refoundation law, which consolidated the principle that all children, including *élèves en situation de handicap*, should have access to education. This development can be read as part of a broader international movement, shaped by the CRPD, UNESCO's inclusion agenda, and the growing emphasis on accessibility and reasonable accommodation.

However, the French institutional lexicon does more than affirm a right to education. It also constructs a field of intervention. Inclusion becomes an administrative problem: students must be identified, needs must be assessed, barriers must be named, and compensatory measures must be allocated. The discourse of inclusion therefore becomes a discourse of accessibility governance.

In the selected institutional texts, this relationship is expressed through the association of *école inclusive*, *handicap*, the right to education, compensation, and institutional support. The policy discourse presents the school as an institution committed to reducing exclusion, while the student recognized as an *élève en situation de handicap* is represented as a rights-bearing subject. This is a major normative shift. It moves away from a model of segregation and toward a model of participation. Gardou (2012) interprets inclusion as a broader social project, while Gombert et al. (2017), Ployé (2013), and Suau and Assude (2016) show that inclusive schooling requires changes in pedagogical organization, professional cooperation, and didactic accessibility.

Yet this shift also has discursive consequences. Once inclusion becomes a policy objective, the institution must classify the differences to be included. The category *élèves à besoins éducatifs spécifiques* plays a key role in this process. The 2004 ministerial dossier brings

together heterogeneous situations, including physical, sensory, and mental disabilities, serious learning or adaptation difficulties, intellectually gifted children, children with illnesses, minors in custodial settings, children from migrant families, and Traveller children. These situations are not equivalent in legal or educational terms. Their grouping under a broader institutional category nevertheless illustrates how different forms of educational need can be organized within a shared administrative framework. The category therefore does not simply describe diversity; it also provides a classificatory framework through which heterogeneous situations can be recognized and addressed institutionally.

The French expression *élèves à besoins éducatifs spécifiques* is particularly powerful because it appears neutral and benevolent. Its English equivalent, “students with special educational needs,” is used here only as a working translation. The French category avoids overtly stigmatizing terms and emphasizes the institution’s responsibility to respond. Nevertheless, it also shifts attention toward the learner as the bearer of a need. The category asks: what does this student need in order to adapt to schooling? It does not always ask: what institutional norms make this student appear as deficient, delayed, or problematic?

This is where accessibility governance differs from accessibility as an emancipatory principle. In principle, accessibility should transform environments so that diverse learners can participate. In the institutional discourse examined here, accessibility is often translated into individualized measures: support, adaptation, compensation, orientation, and special provision. These measures may be necessary and legitimate. They can enable students to access rights and resources. But they may also stabilize the categories that present learners as lacking, delayed, or insufficiently aligned with ordinary school expectations.

6. Semantic Extension and Deficit Framing

One of the most significant findings of the analysis is the semantic extension of the French term *handicap* beyond its medico-legal meaning. In educational discourse, *handicap* does not function only as a legal category referring to officially recognized disability. Its lexical and verbal uses may also provide an analogical frame through which linguistic or educational disadvantage is represented as an obstacle or impediment. This extension is possible because the French lexical field of *handicap* already contains a tension between a general meaning, related to obstruction or limitation, and a medico-social meaning, related to activity limitation and participation restriction. French lexicographical sources show this semantic flexibility: the *TLFi* defines *handicap* in terms of what prevents someone or something from developing or acting freely, while Larousse records both the medico-social definition of activity limitation and the figurative sense of disadvantage (*Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales*, n.d.; *Larousse*, n.d.). The discursive issue is therefore not simply how “disability” is translated into English, but how the French term *handicap* and its verbal derivative *handicaper* circulate across institutional contexts. This semantic movement confirms that *handicap* must be read both as a lexical unit and as a jurilinguistic category whose institutional values are stabilized across legal and administrative uses (Touratier, 2010; Preite, 2017). The 2009 inspection report explicitly draws an analogy between the legal concept of disability and the educational situation of newly arrived non-French-speaking

students (Klein & Sallé, 2009, p. 131). After referring to the definition established by the 2005 law, the authors apply the notion of *handicap* to a linguistic and educational situation. Crucially, they distinguish the disabling effects of the situation from an intrinsic disability of the student. The semantic extension examined here is therefore not a straightforward expansion of the legal category of disability, but a discursive analogy through which linguistic disadvantage is interpreted in relation to rights and compensation.

This semantic flexibility becomes particularly visible in the formulation selected from the 2009 report and reproduced in Table 1. Its syntactic organization constructs linguistic disadvantage as a situational obstacle rather than as an intrinsic attribute of the student. First, the nominal group describing the newly arrived non-French-speaking student's situation brings together migratory and linguistic characteristics within an institutional category. Second, the relative clause attributes the disabling effect to that situation, while grammatically distinguishing the situation from the student affected by it. This distinction is reinforced by the authors' explicit clarification that the student is not intrinsically disabled. Third, the subsequent reference to an entitlement and compensatory measures establishes an argumentative relationship between the identified obstacle and the institutional response. The formulation thus links linguistic categorization, recognition of educational need, and access to support.

The French verb *handicaper* is decisive here. Unlike the noun *handicap*, which can refer to a legally recognized category, *handicaper* functions as a predicative operation: it makes a social and linguistic condition act as an obstacle. Allophony is therefore not framed primarily as a biographical or multilingual resource, but as an impediment to the full realization of the institutional role of *élève*. The formulation presupposes French-language competence as a normative requirement of schooling. In the broader institutional context, this linguistic expectation may also intersect with assumptions about familiarity with ordinary school practices. This does not mean that the institution explicitly pathologizes allophone students. Rather, the formulation produces a deficit frame in which linguistic difference becomes visible mainly as a problem requiring compensation. Billiez and Trimaille (2001), Armagnague (2020), and Guérin (2013) are useful here because they show that allophony and so-called linguistic *handicap* must be understood in relation to social trajectories, institutional accessibility, and unequal conditions of schooling, not as individual linguistic deficiency.

A comparable process can be observed in the formulation concerning poverty and educational achievement. The passage, drawn from an AFEV survey conducted in 2014 and reproduced in the 2015 inspection report, describes inequalities in access to cultural resources among children attending schools in priority education areas (Delahaye, 2015, p. 37). Its comparative construction represents these children's family environments in relation to an implicit norm of access to external cultural resources. The focus on the family environment may invite a deficit-oriented interpretation, insofar as differences in access are represented through the resources available within the family. However, the formulation must be considered in its documentary context: it reports socioeconomic inequalities rather than establishing an intrinsic deficiency of the families concerned. From a discourse-analytical perspective, the passage illustrates how structural disparities may become intelligible through a lexicon of

relative lack and differentiated access. This interpretation is consistent with approaches that caution against reducing families to deficient environments or passive recipients of institutional intervention (Boissel, 2008; Scelles, 2013).

The institutional problem is therefore not only lexical. It is also syntactic and argumentative. Through nominal expressions and categorial nouns such as *situation*, *besoin*, *difficulté*, and *manque*, institutional discourse can represent dynamic or relational processes as relatively stabilized states. A student does not simply encounter barriers; they become institutionally categorized as having specific educational needs. A family does not simply face unequal access to resources; it becomes an insufficiently resourced family environment. A linguistic trajectory does not simply require institutional mediation; it becomes an obstacle to be compensated.

Krieg-Planque's (2010) work on political and institutional formulas is useful for understanding this process. Expressions such as *école inclusive* or *élèves à besoins éducatifs spécifiques* function as formulas that appear consensual and difficult to contest. Who could be against inclusion? Who could refuse to respond to needs? Yet their apparent neutrality can mask the implicit classifications they produce. As Koren (1996) argues, repeated denominations may make implicit reasoning appear self-evident.

7. Compensation as an Ambivalent Institutional Response

The notion of compensation occupies a central place in the discourse analyzed here. It is the mechanism through which a categorized difficulty becomes a right to support. In disability policy, compensation is a key legal and ethical principle: it aims to reduce inequalities produced by impairment, barriers, and inaccessible environments. In educational discourse, compensation may take the form of human assistance, adapted materials, pedagogical adjustments, language support, or institutional orientation.

Within a rights-based policy framework, compensation is intended to address recognized barriers to participation and to facilitate access to educational resources. Institutional recognition can therefore have an enabling function: it provides a basis for identifying support needs and establishing legitimate claims to assistance. The present analysis concerns this rights-conferring function as articulated in institutional discourse; it does not assess the effectiveness of compensatory measures in classroom practice.

However, compensation is also ambivalent because it may confirm the deficit frame that made the student eligible for support. If the problem is defined primarily as a lack located in the student or in the student's family situation, the compensatory response may leave the ordinary norms of schooling relatively unchanged. The student is helped to adjust to the institution, while the institution's linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural expectations are less radically questioned.

This is why the shift from compensation to accessibility is theoretically important. Compensation starts from an identified disadvantage and provides a corrective measure. Accessibility starts from the environment and asks how it can be designed so that diverse learners can participate from the outset. Ebersold's work on accessibility, cited by

Armagnague (2020), is particularly relevant here: accessibility is not only a technical matter but a reconfiguration of the relationship between school norms and learner diversity.

The discourse of *besoins éducatifs spécifiques* tends to oscillate between these two logics. On the one hand, it supports inclusion by recognizing that different learners require different forms of access. On the other hand, it risks classifying diversity according to degrees of deviation from an implicit norm. The institution includes by naming, but the name may also mark the subject as different, incomplete, or in need of correction.

This ambivalence also raises the issue of subjectivation. Institutional categories such as *élève à besoins éducatifs spécifiques*, *élève en situation de handicap*, *besoin*, *difficulté*, or *obstacle* do not simply describe students; they define the terms under which students become visible to the school. A learner is recognized through a category that can be protective, because it opens access to rights and support, but that can also be stigmatizing, because it makes the learner visible through lack, need, or deviation from an expected norm. Goffman's (1963) analysis of stigma is useful here: social labels do not simply identify individuals; they organize interactions and expectations. Although the present corpus does not allow us to observe students' subjective experiences directly, it does allow us to identify the discursive conditions under which marginal positioning becomes institutionally available. Repeated visibility through *besoin*, *difficulté*, *handicap*, or *compensation* makes stigmatizing forms of recognition discursively available, even when the stated institutional aim of the category is protection or support. Whether and how such forms of recognition are actually experienced, reproduced, or resisted by students and other stakeholders cannot be established from the present textual corpus.

8. Discussion: Inclusion, Governance, and the Visibility of Difference

The analysis suggests that inclusive education discourse should not be understood only as a progressive lexicon of rights. It is also a language of governance. It defines who is included, why, through which category, and at what institutional cost. The categories of *handicap*, *besoins éducatifs spécifiques*, *compensation*, and accessibility do not simply accompany policy; they organize the field of possible action.

This does not mean that such categories should be rejected. On the contrary, without categories, many rights would remain inaccessible. Legal and administrative recognition is often a necessary condition for support. The 2005 law's definition of *handicap*, for example, is crucial because it links limitation, participation, environment, and rights. Similarly, the category *besoins éducatifs spécifiques* can help institutions respond to diverse forms of vulnerability.

The problem lies in the way categories are framed. If *handicap*-related categories are framed relationally, they can support accessibility and institutional transformation. If they are framed through deficit, they risk individualizing structural inequalities. In the French educational discourse analyzed here, both tendencies coexist. The language of inclusion and compensation recognizes rights, but it often represents difference through need, lack, and deviation from an expected student profile.

This coexistence is not accidental. It reflects a broader tension in inclusive education policy. Inclusion seeks to transform the institution, but policy instruments often require individual classification. Accessibility aims to remove barriers, but administrative systems often begin by identifying the person who is considered to have a problem. The result is a paradox: the institution includes by categorizing, but categorization may reproduce the very boundaries that inclusion seeks to overcome.

The concept of accessibility governance captures this paradox by describing the linguistic and administrative processes through which institutions make difference visible, convert it into recognized need, attach rights or measures to it, and regulate the relation between learner diversity and school norms. This concept allows us to move beyond a simple opposition between inclusive and exclusionary discourse. The same category may be both enabling and limiting; the same compensatory measure may both reduce inequality and confirm deficit framing.

For sociolinguistics, this analysis shows the importance of studying institutional categories as part of language policy in a broad sense. Language policy is not only about named languages, linguistic rights, or language teaching. It is also about the categories through which linguistic subjects are made governable. The allophone student is not only a learner of French; they are an institutional subject produced at the intersection of migration, schooling, language, and administrative recognition. In this sense, French inclusive education discourse is a privileged site for analyzing how linguistic diversity is translated into educational need.

For discourse analysis, the findings highlight the importance of studying presuppositions, nominalizations, and classificatory lists. Much of the ideological work of institutional discourse does not occur through explicit argument but through apparently neutral categories. Terms such as *inclusion*, *compensation*, and *besoins éducatifs spécifiques* appear self-evidently positive. Yet they carry assumptions about normality, deficiency, institutional responsibility, and student adequacy.

9. Conclusion

This article has examined the institutional naming of *handicap* in French legal and educational policy discourse from the perspective of accessibility governance. It has shown that the institutional naming of *handicap* is not a merely lexical process. It is a way of producing categories through which rights, needs, and compensatory measures become administratively intelligible.

The legal corpus shows a gradual stabilization of *handicap* as a public and legal category. The 1957 law links *handicap* to work and reclassification through the category *travailleur handicapé*; the 1975 law broadens *handicap* into a matter of national solidarity and social integration; the 2005 law defines *handicap* through *limitation d'activité*, *restriction de participation*, *altération*, and *environnement*. This legal definition introduces a relational dimension, but it also maintains a classificatory and deficit-oriented lexicon.

The educational corpus shows how disability-related terminology is reconfigured in school policy discourse. Since 2013, *école inclusive* has become a central policy principle, while

broader educational categories have brought heterogeneous situations within a shared framework of institutional support. The analysis distinguishes the analogical use of *handicap* in relation to linguistic disadvantage from the administrative grouping of disability-related, linguistic, and socioeconomic needs. These processes are connected, but they do not entail an equivalence between the legal recognition of disability and other forms of educational disadvantage.

The main argument is that these discursive and classificatory processes have ambivalent implications. They can legitimize access to rights and compensatory measures, but they may also produce deficit frames in which linguistic and social differences are interpreted as individual shortcomings. Allophony and poverty are not explicitly pathologized, but they can be translated into a grammar of lack, obstacle, and compensation.

The article's contribution is therefore both theoretical and methodological. Theoretically, it proposes accessibility governance as a way of analyzing the institutional management of learner diversity through discourse. Methodologically, it shows how the combined analysis of lexical series, definitional formulas, classificatory lists, syntactic constructions, and *préimposés* can identify the implicit normative frames through which inclusive policy discourse organizes educational difference.

The study is limited to institutional texts and does not examine classroom practices or the lived experiences of categorized students. Future research should therefore combine discourse analysis with ethnographic observation, interviews with teachers, support workers, families, and students, and comparative analysis of other national contexts. Such research would make it possible to examine how institutional categories are appropriated, resisted, or transformed in practice, and to triangulate the discourse-analytic findings developed here with classroom enactments and stakeholders' reported experiences.

Nevertheless, the analysis shows that inclusive education cannot be understood without studying its language. Inclusion is not only a policy objective; it is also a way of naming differences, organizing rights, and governing access. If inclusion is to become genuinely emancipatory, its categories must be critically examined so that they do not reproduce deficit frames while claiming to overcome exclusion.

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