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INVENTED SPELLING FOR ACHIEVING LITERACY ON ONE'S OWN

A persistent ideal of autonomy producing inequalities

Fabienne Montmasson-Michel

The French *école maternelle* is specific in that it offers a collective education to young children from the age of 2 within the framework of the educational institution.¹ It was established in the 19th century with the Ferry laws of 1881–1882 which founded the contemporary elementary school system. This school system designed for early childhood is part and parcel of the educational rationale: it is placed under the supervision of the Ministry of National Education, organized into school age groups, with *curricula* aiming at school-based knowledge and skills and teachers trained at university to teach children from 2 to 11 years of age. Its non-compulsory nature has not prevented it, throughout the 20th century, from conquering the educational monopoly over young children from the age of 3: since the mid-1990s, it has enrolled 100% of the 3–6 age group in metropolitan France² (Ministry of National Education, 2012). This process reached a new stage with the introduction of compulsory schooling from the age of three implemented by the last school law³: in France, schooling has thus become virtually compulsory from the age of 3.⁴

Nevertheless, the French *école maternelle* has historically built up for itself an identity as a separate school system, drawing its specificity from the very young public it caters to, with particular concerns and its own distinct pedagogy considered as non-academic. This is due to the great attention paid to physical education, sociability, welcoming children and families and the promotion of an “expressive model” (Plaisance, 1986). This pedagogical model, which reached an acme in the 1970s, valued individuality, self-fulfilment, and personal expression; it promoted learning through exploration, playing, and artistic practice. Besides, it privileged oral skills over written techniques (Chamboredon & Prévot, 1973; Plaisance, 1986). It was thus opposed to a

“productive model” (Plaisance, 1986), which valued traditional school-based forms of learning: training in writing techniques, repeated exercises, memorization. However, during the second half of the 20th century, a new social demand gradually came to prevail over the preschool and kindergarten system: the prevention of “academic failure”, which followed the massification of secondary education and the lengthening of schooling (Isambert-Jamati, 1985), with its focus on academic reading (Chartier, 2007). A “field of professional intervention”⁵ was then formed around early literacy to provide knowledge, standards, and recommendations to usher young children into written culture: a practice of oral language shaped by the constraints of writing and an initiation to the concepts, objects, and techniques of writing. Several studies emphasize the fact that this social demand generates a process of schooling in the *école maternelle* around school expectations and rationales (Garnier, 2009; Leroy, 2020). In that movement, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, language becomes a priority in the formal *curriculum*: whether it is channelled through oral or graphic skills, the language in question is embedded within written culture and intended to prepare for further schooling (Montmasson-Michel, 2018). However, the expressive model embodying the identity of the *école maternelle* as specific to early childhood has not disappeared and co-exists with the priority given to language. While it is questioned by those who see the *école maternelle* as a propaedeutic period towards elementary school, the expressive model also benefits from support among educational and political circles, including in the field of professional intervention on early literacy. Indeed, a lexicographical analysis of programmatic texts for *the école maternelle*⁶ reveals two simultaneous movements: on the one hand, the continual increase of discourse on language and on the other, the pendulum swing of expressive discourse, moving forward or backward from one programme to the next, without ever vanishing entirely (Montmasson-Michel, 2018, pp. 151–164). This being said, the promotion of a preschool system that distances itself from pedagogical practices traditionally attached to school-based learning (exercises, repetition, organized transmission of knowledge, etc.) does not exclude strong cultural and academic ambitions. On the contrary, sociological studies show that the expressive model of the *école maternelle* is not socially neutral: it is in keeping with the perspectives and educational resources of the culturally dominant social classes that have forged the figure of a young child endowed with language skills who is the recipient of a “legitimate culture”. They have founded the pedagogical standards of the massified preschool system (Bernstein, 1975; Chamboredon & Prévot, 1973; Plaisance, 1986). According to these educational perspectives, the young child is prepared for the demands of long, reflexive, and conceptual studies (Bautier & ESCOL, 2008), not only for the more modest demands of an elementary school system focused on the systematized learning of the alphabetic code. The pedagogy of initiation to writing carried out by the expressive model is indissociably

invisible (Bernstein, 1975), because it does not come across as the transmission of knowledge and techniques, and non-explicit, because it does not make learners acquire, in a structured and progressive way, the intellectual techniques indispensable to the autonomous acquisition of writing (Garcia, 2021; Garcia & Oller, 2018).

Thus, the “ideal client” (Becker, 1952, p. 451) for that kind of pedagogy is the offspring of culturally dominant social classes, the child who is prepared to read in school at an early age thanks to their family socialization (Renard, 2011). Such a child is endowed with the reflexive linguistic and cognitive resources present in extended literacy⁷ (Bautier, 2010), and also with technical acquisitions made at home (Garcia, 2018): thus, they can take advantage of school socialization without being subjected to academic forms of learning through exercise and training. Thereby, they are cognitively autonomous children, to take up sociologist Bernard Lahire’s conceptualization (2001a); in other words, children who ideally learn on their own.

This chapter proposes to examine this norm of autonomy in early literacy learning by focusing on the sociological analysis of a pedagogical and didactic *dispositif* originally designed to teach the alphabetical code to young children without any prior explicit learning or specific technical training. This is the paradigm of “invented spelling” (Fayol & Jaffré, 2014), translated as “invented writing” (*écriture inventée*) in French, also referred to as approximate, provisional spelling or writing or even writing by trial and error. Its principle consists in putting children in a situation enticing them to write when they cannot yet read or write, in order to gradually lead them to learn the alphabetical code. The latest preschool syllabi thus recommend to schedule “writing trials” intended to entice children to produce “first independent writing(s)” (Ministry of National Education, 2015; Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports, 2021). This chapter aims to show that this is indeed a *dispositif* based on the “cognitive autonomy” (Lahire, 2001a) of young children and that as such, it participates to increasing social inequalities in schools.

This analysis is based on the findings of our dissertation dealing with the socialization through language of *école maternelle* pupils (Montmasson-Michel, 2018). It is based on a literature review and documents analysis, as well as ethnographic field research conducted from 2010 to 2015 in preschools and kindergartens and in families living in a rural environment around a medium-sized town located in the north of the area called Nouvelle-Aquitaine. The research target respondents were aged 2 to 6 and were enrolled in 15 classes from 5 public preschools and kindergartens with differing social characteristics. Two of them were the subject of a longitudinal survey conducted over several years: one where lower and working classes predominate, the other where middle classes prevail. The data collection is based on observation sessions, interviews, and documentary collections. A total of 153 children were interviewed, with a focus on 25 of them (via intensive and systematized data

collection); there were 270 hours of observation with note-taking, sound recordings, and photographs; the observation of 12 teachers; 62 interviews with 58 children; 34 interviews with 30 school staff (including 22 interviews with 19 teachers); and 35 interviews conducted in the homes of 23 families with varying social conditions. The local pedagogical recommendations were also captured thanks to immersion in the geographical and social environment during the time of the survey: it included access to the pedagogical resources available in the *département*, informal exchanges with various actors, and attendance at pedagogical activities.

The theoretical framework of this study is a sociology of socialization which considers that what individuals are and what they do are the outcome of their social experiences. These are internalized in the form of dispositions that are propensities to perceive, act, think, mobilize language, etc., in a socially situated manner (Darmon, 2016; Lahire, 2001b, 2003). The social configurations founding the social dispositions studied in this research have been characterized by the existing research on autonomy in school (Durler, 2015; Lahire, 2001a) and on learning to read in France (Deauvieu et al., 2015; Deauvieu & Terrail, 2018; Garcia, 2013; Garcia & Oller, 2015). According to the latter, alphabetic techniques have been devalued by the slogan “reading is understanding”, which subsumes the social definition of reading required by long studies (Chartier, 2007). They have been replaced by a literary and scholastic conception of reading and the process of learning to read which grants supremacy to reflexivity (Garcia, 2013). This proves detrimental to children from lower and working classes but also to some of those who come from lower-middle classes.

In order to demonstrate the logic and effects of this pedagogical *dispositif* requiring early cognitive autonomy, the first part of our study offers a historical perspective examining its formation in the scientific field and its penetration in France into the field of research on education; then we turn to the formal *curriculum* and official recommendations. Our second part examines its implementation in the actual *curriculum*, by focusing on what the teachers who practice it say and do, and then we turn to the analysis of a session observed in a class involving three children with different literacy backgrounds.

From universal psychogenesis to the *curriculum*: An ideal of cognitive autonomy for early childhood

A psychogenetic theory of ethnocentric reading

As early as the 1960s and 1970s, English-speaking researchers discovered that young children have an understanding of the written word before they reach school age (Durkin, 1966; Goodman, 1986); they collected samples of children’s graphic productions bearing witness to this (Chomsky, 1970, 1971a, 1971b; Clay, 1975; Read, 1971, 1986). Positioning them as a set forming a

series reveals what appears at first as “emergent literacy” (Joigneaux, 2013), eventually leading to the mastery of writing: they start with scribbblings followed by drawings mixed with signs – pseudo letters, numbers, and letters – to finally make room for letters that align and order themselves and then to grapho-phonological combinations, words, sentences, and texts. Much of this work adopts an ethnocentric perspective based on the innate: they aim to capture what could be a self-taught manner of learning to read in the graphic performances of children who are socially situated since they belong to the researchers’ social group and are even sometimes their own children (Joigneaux, 2013, p. 121). For instance, Glenda L. Bissex, who was a teacher of English in the United States, published *GNYS AT WRK* (“genius at work”) in 1980, whose title faithfully reproduces the message her son Paul posted on his bedroom entrance when he was working on inventing his own writing system at age 5 (Bissex, 1980). He is said to have learned to produce standardized texts in a few years, on his own and as his own teacher (Bissex, 1984). This paradigm, therefore, presupposes the existence of a child genius, able to learn the alphabetical code and techniques all by himself as soon as he is allowed to express himself in writing.

That being said, such early Anglo-Saxon works made very limited inroads into French education circles, and it was in the 1970s, between Geneva and South America, that the theory successfully imported into France was forged in the guise of the work of Argentine psychologist Emilia Ferreiro. Forced into political exile by the military juntas, trained by Jean Piaget in Geneva, rapidly publishing her work in Spanish, English, and French (Ferreiro, 1977, 1979, 1984, 1986, 1988; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1979, 1983), she thus subsumed several conditions leading to her gaining influence in the *milieu* of the French “pedagogical left” engaged in inventing the “genius young reader” precisely at that time (Garcia, 2013, pp. 23–114). In those circles, the promoters of early literacy who idealized the concept of a reflexive young child found reasons to re-assess the learning of the alphabetical code as well as their so-called low-level techniques and to cultivate social distinction (Bourdieu, 1979), while claiming to be engaged in reducing social inequalities in school.

For Emilia Ferreiro, the child “tries to understand the world around them and develops provisional theories about the world” (Ferreiro, 2001, p. 24) and this is how they learn the alphabetical code. To demonstrate this, she developed a methodological *dispositif* that was to be replicated on a large scale for several decades in different fields and among different populations: each child, before he was a reader and an autonomous writer, was invited – and even prompted – to write, and then was subjected to a Piagetian “clinical interview” of their production, intended to reveal their conceptualization of writing. Emilia Ferreiro elaborated a psychogenetic and universal theory of writing by stages from this broad empirical basis:

Everything seems to indicate that we are in the presence of a real psychogenesis with its own internal logic, which means that the information coming from the environment is incorporated into interpretative systems the succession of which is not random.

(Ferreiro, 2000, p. 59)

The child is said to learn the alphabetical code by asking themselves “epistemological questions” (Ferreiro, 2000, p. 61) and not by learning alphabetic techniques, the teaching of which is forbidden because it would prevent the conceptualization of writing. It is thus a genetic theory which, on the theoretical as well as methodological levels, evacuates the social construction of dispositions. However, as the French historian of education and reading Anne-Marie Chartier points out, what these studies reveal is more

a socially and historically situated experience. (...) Knowledge of letters and of the written language, reconstructed by children before they know how to read and write, shows the extent to which they are immersed, from an early age, in a school-based and “scripted” universe. The fact that this pre-knowledge has been transformed (wrongly) into proof that the child learns by “spontaneous development” and into a tool for teaching reading and writing is not the least of existing paradoxes.

(Chartier, 2011, pp. 8–9)

The French appropriation of Emilia Ferreiro’s work and the didactization of the invented spelling paradigm

In 1979, Emilia Ferreiro was invited to Paris to attend the Ministry of National Education’s conference on *Apprentissage et pratique de la lecture* (Learning and Practicing Reading), to explain “how the child discovers the writing system” (Ferreiro, 1979). She was welcomed enthusiastically by a group of pioneers working in the professional field of early literacy. All were active in contiguous territories around the same ideology: the child is a being evolving in the very midst of language and capable of creative, demanding cognitive activities such as confronting complexity, making hypotheses, assessing and solving problems as well as interpreting language. Ferreiro’s work definitely penetrated French education circles from then on. At the end of the 1980s, she published in French presses recognized in the educational world (Ferreiro, 1988, 2000, 2001; Ferreiro & Gomez Palacio, 1988). Her work was very quickly replicated by teams of researchers in education, supported by action-research initiatives involving teachers and their instructors, thus permeating all initial and continuing education training schemes (Besse, 1990, 1993, 2001; Besse et al., 1988; Brigaudiot, 1998, 2015; Calleja et al., 1998; David & Fraquet, 2011, 2012; David & Morin, 2013; Fijalkow & Fijalkow, 1991;

Fraquet & David, 2013; INRP & Brigaudiot, 2004; Jaffré et al., 1999; Pasa et al. 2006; Rosaz, 2003). In 1992, her publications were referenced in an institutional text presenting a state-of-the-art description of scientific knowledge on the processes involved in learning to write, which was widely distributed by the institutional prescriptive apparatus (Ministry of National Education and Culture, 1992, p. 153, 176–177). From 2002 onwards, the paradigm penetrated the *curriculum* for preschool and kindergarten teaching and the supporting documentation. According to the 2002 *curriculum*, the child “invents successive writing systems”, and “it is important to let them build upon their knowledge of the alphabetic principle” (Ministry of National Education, 2002, p. 24). The supporting documentation on language devotes five pages to “writing trials” (Ministry of National Education, 2006, pp. 100–104). The recommendation to have “writing trials” disappeared from the 2008 programme (Ministry of National Education, 2008), but it persisted in the supporting documentation (Ministry of National Education, 2011), then reappeared in the 2015 *curriculum* and in its revised version of 2021, where it is combined with the notion of “independent writing(s)” (Ministry of National Education, 2015; Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports, 2021). Finally, it is found among a glut of “support resources” available online.⁸

Including the paradigm of invented spelling in official school prescriptions is motivated by research on education. In the 2000s and 2010s, the clinical research protocol formalized by Emilia Ferreiro was reconfigured into a didactic *dispositif* (Fijalkow et al., 2009), prompting students to behave like “word builders” and “discoverers of writing material” (Rosaz, 2003, p. 17) in order to “produce writing through the progressive resolution of linguistic and (ortho)graphic problems” (Fraquet & David, 2013, p. 40). Two elements structure this didactic transposition. The first one appears in the institutional recommendations made from 2006 onwards (Ministry of National Education, 2006): in order to write, children are called upon to mobilize the external resources, and not merely internal ones like Emilia Ferreiro thought, found among the “referents” or written material available in the classroom (displays, posters, tools). But the chronotopic⁹ and alphabetical¹⁰ prerequisites necessary for the mobilization of such resources, which young children actually find in their material environment, seem to be overlooked: finding the written materials that work as reference is thought of as obvious and their mere presence in the environment is felt to be sufficient for children to appropriate them successfully. A second element of didactic transposition is the conversion of the clinical interview into a “metagraphic interview” (Fraquet & David, 2013) during which the child is expected to produce a reflexive discourse on their writing. Considered in this literature as the core of teacher expertise for children to conceptualize alphabetic writing, this didactic principle recalls the inscription of the *dispositif* within the reflexive demands of extended literacy.

Those studies belong to a francophone scientific environment, embedded itself within an international scientific environment that has committed much effort to emergent literacy (Joigneaux, 2013). For example, a report produced by a Canadian researcher specializing in the issue for the consensus conference¹¹ *Écrire et Rédiger* (Writing and Reading) held on March 14 and 15, 2018, by the Cnesco (National Council for School System Evaluation) (Sénéchal, 2018) concluded that “invented spelling (*écriture inventée*), when done with the help of an adult, can become one of the levers that facilitate learning to read” (ibid., p. 8). The note adopts a North American approach, more pragmatic and much less ideological than the one that prevailed in France around the elaboration of the 2002 *école maternelle* programmes for the alphabetization of young children: supported by Anglo-Saxon research on emergent literacy, it considers in particular that a good part of children’s skills comes from family socialization (Sénéchal, 2006; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002) and clearly distances itself from the original paradigm according to which intervening before children begin school or when they are actually learning impedes their conceptualization of the written word. However, this new paradigm is not devoid of conceptions based on cognitive autonomy, which is not very sensitive to social inequalities, especially when it comes to children who are not very familiar with writing. Indeed, the note is centred on a thoroughly detailed study by the author (Ouellette & Sénéchal, 2008) intent on measuring the effects of an activity based on invented spelling practices to be compared with two control groups. The children in the three groups received instruction in the ten letter-sound correspondences used in the tasks assessed. However, the control groups were then placed in a situation not very or not at all conducive to the alphabetization of children without prerequisites: a purely phonological activity (involving the sound analysis of language based on images)¹² and a non-alphabetic activity (drawing). Thus, this case study does not specifically attempt to show the value of the *dispositif* for teaching literacy to children with little or no prerequisites, nor does it show its potential advantage over more explicit pre-literacy approaches, such as teaching letters and grapho-phonological correspondences through demonstration, practice, and repetition. On the other hand, research on invented spelling, whether it is done internationally or in France, reveals the extreme heterogeneity of children’s productions when invented spelling is done on demand, which underlines their unequal character and symbolic violence: a review of contemporary work thus finds an average of 20% of children refusing to write in kindergarten¹³ (Fraquet & David, 2013, p. 29). A significant proportion of the children produce nothing, and some productions contain almost no alphabetical signs, while others engage in actual writing. However, since one of the main features of the system is the reflexive discourse that the children produce on their own drawings, we are forced to note that the less the children have acquired what allows them to produce invented spelling, the more disadvantaged they are by the *dispositif*.

These elements confirm the characterization of the invented spelling *dispositif*— both in its original form and, to a lesser extent, in its didactic form – as a *dispositif* based on cognitive autonomy. It is probably appropriate for children with previous knowledge of literacy (especially of chronotopic and alphabetical elements), but it does not seem to be very conducive to the alphabetization of children who know almost nothing about logic, knowledge, and techniques of writing. Let us now examine how the prescriptions of invented or approximate spelling or writing are translated into the actual *curriculum* of the French *école maternelle* in the light of the ethnographic survey carried out between 2010 and 2015.

A transposition into the actual curriculum that is difficult for the teachers and unequal for the children

An ideological recommendation, with little concern for concrete practices

What is striking, first of all, in light of the ethnographic survey, is the gap between the infatuation of the prescription apparatus with invented spelling on the one hand, and its weak and difficult transposition into the real *curriculum* on the other hand. While the *dispositif* was greatly promoted locally in the 2000s and 2010s through various modalities (such as conferences, training workshops, canvassing, and the promotion of volunteer teachers), over the course of the entire survey, all the material collected on invented spelling remained limited to the following: six teachers declaring that they practice it a little, mainly in at the kindergarten level; a poster featuring the collective productions of kindergarten children in the school whose enrolment base is predominantly lower and working-class;¹⁴ two yearly individual productions found in the folders of pupils in one kindergarten class, and three productions in the other, in the school whose pupils come predominantly from middle-class families;¹⁵ and a single observed session of about 25 minutes involving three children in the second of those classes.

Analysing the comments made by the teachers who said that they practiced invented spelling reveals three things. First of all, they experience the institutional enthusiasm for the system as a form of pressure, through the manner in which their teaching is assessed and through the comments made by the National Education inspectors¹⁶ (incentives, encouragements, congratulations). Without radically questioning the *dispositif* itself, they distanced themselves from these forms of coercion by various means: for example, by irony (“no, that can’t be, I only did one session this year! [...] my, I must have hit the jackpot!” said one teacher, which was congratulated by her inspector) or the expression of reluctance (“she wanted to push further and then do too much. Then too much is too much!”). The second salient aspect is the concern they

expressed for the significant difficulties experienced by some children to produce invented spelling, which they say they had to cope with: they speak of “stops”, “kids [who] are not well”, “dejection”, “panic”, one of them even declares, “I have the impression that I was being violent towards them”. They also noted that only the most advanced students could use the famous “referents”, i.e., the written material interspersed in the class which is supposed to constitute a form of support for writing endeavours. The third aspect that emerges is the revelation of arrangements with the ideology of independent writing that they are hardly aware of. Most of them say that they provide “support” to the children, i.e., prior alphabetical and grapho-phonological acquisitions: they teach the children their letters and some grapho-phonological links, or they train them to encode regular syllables during dictation exercises. Two of them even propose explicit teaching through showing, training, and a didactic set-up which has nothing to do with the ideal of a *dispositif* allowing for autonomy. First, a teacher in an ordinary preschool class explains how she “sells out” information to her young students (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964, p. 111): “well in advance (...) I find a sentence (...) and there, I explain how I do it. So, I pronounce the words, I insist on the beginning and then I say, ‘well it’s this letter here that makes the noise’, at the beginning I SAY everything”. The second is a special education teacher, working with children identified as “having learning difficulties” at the end of kindergarten because they are not very literate; she implements a progressive support system, which thoroughly guides the students to encode words. She chooses a restricted set of letters corresponding to simple and univocal graphemes, she resorts to memorization games, and the children manipulate the chosen letters in the form of pre-selected mobile letters and encode them into words chosen by the teacher because they contain one or two regular syllables that can be written with these letters only.

However, at the time the survey was conducted, these explicit pedagogical practices based upon visible learning remain strategies that teachers individually tinker with, without support from the educational institution, which does not provide any opportunity for collective development and sharing among peers. Their pedagogical discoveries do not seem to attract the attention of the pedagogical supervisors working in the district in question. In their respective schools, the colleagues of the two teachers who voiced out their difficulties were not aware of their practices and therefore could not identify them as resources and appropriate them to overcome the difficulties encountered with certain children. In fact, it is striking to note the extent to which the inspectors’ encouragement and incentives fail to be accompanied by any concrete pedagogical advice. Their discourse, as it appeared in the survey, can be summarized as follows: kindergarten is not the place for systematic training in alphabetic techniques, it is necessary to practice invented spelling, and if it fails, it is because more of it must be done, earlier and more frequently. Nothing is said about what this practice implies in order to make all pupils

improve, neither in terms of the kind of work that can be done upstream nor in terms of situational support for the least prepared students. As far as standards and their diffusion in the real *curriculum* are concerned, when this study was undertaken the practice of invented spelling was mainly an ideal and even an ideology of cognitive autonomy.

The researcher, the tester, and the castaway

The analysis of the only occasion during which invented spelling could be observed in the course of this survey, in a kindergarten class of a predominantly middle-class school, allows us to grasp the way in which this *dispositif*, based on children's cognitive autonomy, can actually generate educational inequalities. The situation is a "writing production" session that took place in first grade in March 2015. The pupils had to respond to the instruction, "Write a sentence that begins with: In the yard, I play...". The session was made up of two parts: the first one where the teacher guided the children to try and write together, "In the yard, I play...", and the second one where they had to try on their own to flesh out the sentence, based on their individual writing intentions.

Three children are involved: Emy, Siméon, and Tiphaine.¹⁷ The family socializations of Emy¹⁸ and Siméon¹⁹ are well-known: reading together is valued, but not early literacy techniques. In fact, both of them have less literacy knowledge than most of their peers, but gender socialization also makes a difference: Emy has reading and graphic practices in female fictional universes that lead her to take an interest in the alphabetical code and to make learning attempts with her sisters, her female friends or to ask her mother. For example, she recognizes many letters, knows how to write them, and knows also some sound values. On the other hand, Siméon constructs language dispositions on the oral and practical levels thanks to his fictional universes and his male peers (Montmasson-Michel, 2016, 2020), which is not very conducive to literacy. Tiphaine's family socialization²⁰ is not known. However, when she is observed during her kindergarten year, she demonstrates that she is comfortable with school exercises and has well-developed alphabetical knowledge. At the end of kindergarten, for example, she knows the names and sounds of many letters and phonetically encodes short regular words.

During the first part of the group session, Tiphaine and Emy quickly responded to the teacher's questions, as she guided them step by step to write "*Dans la cour je joue*" (In the yard I play) by activating and developing their skills, Tiphaine's skills being more numerous, more confident and also more regular than Emy's. Siméon did not make any suggestions, said that he heard "nothing at all" when he was asked questions, that he could not write certain letters anymore; he copied his classmates' work, often drew letters backwards, and erased his work often. His pencil fell on the floor several times. In a second phase, the children were left on their own to write the rest of their sentence.

Tiphaine was very comfortable and quickly managed to write “*o papa é la maman*” (for “I play mom and dad”) (Figure 2.1) by resorting to her own skills. Then she began to draw her illustration, with much painstaking care.

On the other hand, Emy then found it impossible to move forward like Siméon since the teacher was no longer there. Their weak cognitive autonomy is thus underscored by a weak “political autonomy”, which is the ability to discipline oneself along the lines of expected school behaviour (Lahire, 2001a). Both of them engage in a discussion typical of children (Montmasson-Michel, 2016), which enables them to forego school rules: they start playing with their pencils to amuse themselves and invent stories (their pencils shake, clash, roll, tip over, slide, fall to the ground, then become swords, etc.). They immediately stop when the teacher returns. She then helps Emy, who wants to write “*louveteaux*” (cubs) and writes/OOUVOT/ (Figure 2.2).

Then it was Siméon’s turn to write “*chasseurs de Pokémon*” (Pokemon hunters), and he began by writing/O UO E/for “*aux chasseurs de*” (to the hunters of). The teacher asks him to “read again” by pointing out what he has written,

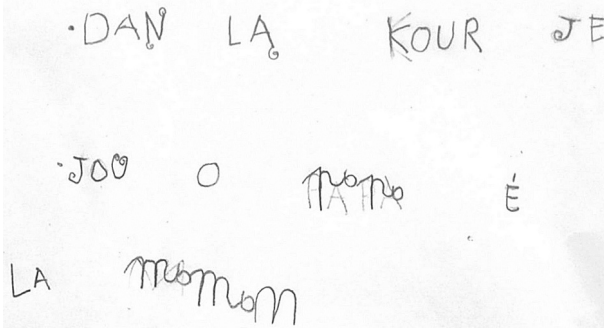


FIGURE 2.1 Tiphaine’s writing.

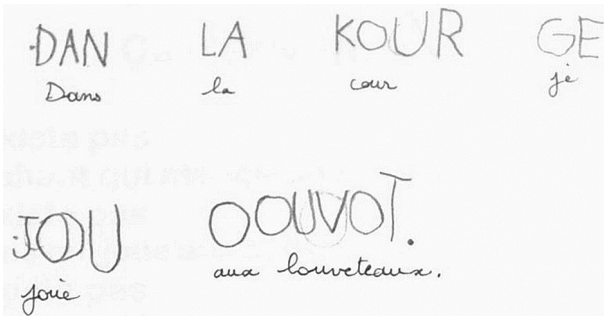


FIGURE 2.2 Emy’s writing.

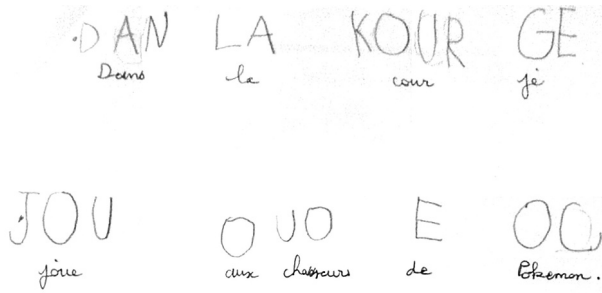


FIGURE 2.3 Siméon's writing.

and he has a lot of trouble. Then she prompts him to continue, and he starts writing “*Pokémon*” by writing O for “*po*”, which the teacher accepts, and then by proposing the letter C for “*ké*”, which she also accepts (Figure 2.3). When she asks him what he hears at the end of the word “*Pokémon*”, he says he can’t hear anything more and she says, “Well, then if you don’t hear anything more, if you don’t know how it’s spelled, if you’re done, you put a little dot at the end to say it’s over”. He then exclaims vehemently that he is not finished, which he is right about, but the teacher firmly urges him to start drawing because the end of the session is drawing near, and he will have to move on.

The analysis of this session within the framework of “case-based reasoning” (Passeron & Revel, 2005) shows that when children with unequal resources are confronted with a *dispositif* of this type, the most advanced among them are valued, activate their knowledge, learn things and progress, whereas the less advanced are disqualified, produce lesser achievements, and fail to learn what they would precisely need to learn. Beyond mere literacy learning, such logics have been described in other research on preschools (Millet & Croizet, 2016).

Conclusion

Presupposing early childhood autonomy leads to valuing distal forms of socialization (in which the bodies of socializing agents and socialized children are distant) and regulations of activity that are not very explicit and produce vast differences. It perpetuates the reproduction of social inequalities in school. However, more equalizing socializing practices – because they do not presuppose the cognitive autonomy of young children – also exist, in the form of individual pedagogical experiences and arrangements with the norm that are not exceedingly objectified. They take place in a completely different socializing logic, one that is proximal and explicit: working with children, based on their real resources and not idealized ones, centring on their learning, anchored in the materiality of the instruments, the supports, and the objects of written culture.

The rewriting of the 2015 *curriculum* in June 2021 did not dispense with the recommendation of organizing writing trials and the notion of independent writing. However, it gave back importance to alphabetic techniques, which cognitive psychology has shown to be effective when children are ushered into the world of reading (Ecalte & Magnan, 2015). This is likely to promote the didactization of the *dispositif* in favour of word-encoding activities without speculation on the cognitive autonomy of children who do not yet master it. Such an evolution could be a sign of the demise of conceptions or practices assuming that children “invent” the alphabetical code from their own resources, but we cannot yet be sure. In particular, at the kindergarten level, we could witness a phenomenon similar to what has been uncovered when it comes to learning to read in first and second grade: the promotion of so-called “mixed” reading methods rather than entirely alphabetic-syllabic methods, the advantages of which for the children least acculturated to writing have been demonstrated by numerous scientific and empirical arguments (Deauvieu & Terrail, 2018; Garcia & Oller, 2015). In preschool and kindergarten, writing trials continue to be prescribed, leaving the field open to all sorts of local reinterpretations. If we retain the framework in practice in our field of inquiry, some of the prescribers of pedagogical standards who are in direct contact with teachers continue to adhere to the idea that children learn writing on their own as long as they are placed often in a situation inducing writing, while they cannot yet read or write independently. Their prescriptions are likely to maintain a situation of confusion that is hardly conducive to the development of explicit, proximal teaching practices.

Notes

- 1 This chapter, including the original French citations, was translated by Elisabeth Lamothe.
- 2 This applies to France’s European mainland and excludes overseas territories.
- 3 Law n°2019-791 of July 26, 2019 for schools based upon trust, article 11.
- 4 Parents do have the option of not sending their child to school, but they have to make a reasoned request for authorization, and then they must homeschool their offspring on their own and submit to the tests conducted by the school institution.
- 5 It is defined as “a space within which the activities of members of professional groups concerned with the analysis and treatment of the same problem are organized” (Morel, 2010, p. 15).
- 6 In 40 years, no less than 6 programmatic texts have been elaborated: 1977, 1986, 1995, 2002, 2008, 2015; based on the same structure, this last programme was reshuffled in June 2021.
- 7 This refers to language and cognitive knowledge and skills made possible by the generalization of written culture: memorization, logical analysis, reorganization, reflexivity, abstraction and conceptualization, etc.
- 8 <https://eduscol.education.fr/83/j-enseigne-au-cycle-1> (access date: September 26, 2022).
- 9 The chronotopic dimension of literacy, which is decisive in early learning, refers to the “link between space and time” and the ability to “move through space in an

- orderly and controlled way, whether it is the space of the world or the space of the sheet of paper” (Laparra & Margolinas, 2016, p. 168).
- 10 Knowing the concepts of word, letter, written syllable, names, and the sounds of letters and some grapho-phonological relationships.
 - 11 A public procedure that brings together experts and stakeholders concerned by an issue in order to compare opinions and identify consensus principles for action.
 - 12 On this point, we refer the reader to our critical analysis of a widespread bias found in the French *école maternelle*, in the formal and real *curriculum*: in the name of a primacy of oral skills due to their age, young children should learn the segmentation of the written word (into syllables but also into phonemes) from activities carried out on sound material, possibly with the support of images. This bias puts children who are unfamiliar with written culture at a disadvantage, as they find it very difficult to take exclusively sound material as an object of study and to segment it into alphabetic categories (Montmasson-Michel, 2018, pp. 210–216).
 - 13 Last year of the *école maternelle*, for children from 5 to 6.
 - 14 A short text produced in a group of a few children with the help of a teacher about the pony activity, for example: “IR NOU SOM MONT DEBOU SUR LE PONEY” for “Yesterday, we stood on the pony”.
 - 15 Each child is expected to produce a sentence based on “writing production” instructions. Here are examples of instructions found in these two classes. In October: “Write a sentence about the activity we did at the stadium”. In November: “Draw a moment from your fall vacation and write a sentence to caption your drawing. In January: “Draw your favourite gift” or “Write a greeting”.
 - 16 They are hierarchically above the teachers at the level of a territory (divided into districts by the National Education). Their mission is to implement educational policy at the school level and to assess the work of teachers and give them advice. Together with the pedagogical advisors who assist them (they are teachers who have been relieved of their duties), they are key players in the dissemination of pedagogical standards.
 - 17 All names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the participants.
 - 18 Emy: stay-at-home mother, high school degree with a focus in science [level 4], former sports instructor in the army; father army lieutenant, high school degree with a focus in science and then army entrance exam.
 - 19 Siméon: mother is a nurse's aide in a medical-educational institution who is studying to become a social worker; she initially received a vocational diploma [level 3]; father is absent; maternal grandparents are retired nurses and very present.
 - 20 Tiphaine: her mother is an insurance teleconsultant; her father is in charge of a workshop manufacturing automotive parts.

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