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# 1

## AUTONOMOUS WORKSHOPS AND INDIVIDUAL MONTESSORI-TYPE ACTIVITIES

An analysis of their effects on learning and inequalities

*Ariane Richard-Bossez*

As analysed by Bernard Lahire, the ideal-typical figure of the autonomous pupil in school is that of “an active pupil, in search of meaning, a pupil reflecting, discovering for himself, organizing himself, making choices, self-evaluating and sometimes self-correcting, a pupil who has contributed to making common rules and who, as a result, respects them” (2005, p. 158, our translation). This conception of what a pupil is leads to pedagogical arrangements in the classroom which reflect these expectations of autonomy and the intellectual, instrumental, moral, and expressive forms of engagement that underpin them (Durler, 2014). This autonomy is generally considered as being “already there” and its historical, social, or educational conditions are neither explicitly acknowledged nor questioned. It thus contributes to the development of educational inequalities among pupils who are more or less familiar with the attitudes required in these forms of organization (Périer, 2014). This vision of an autonomous pupil can be found in the first years of schooling in many countries. In the case of France, Christophe Joigneaux (2014) has highlighted how, in the ministerial texts dedicated to the *école maternelle*, autonomy constitutes a “pedagogical ideal” whose clout has been growing since the 1970s.

### **THE FRENCH *ÉCOLE MATERNELLE***

The *école maternelle* is the first level of the French education system. Since September 2019, it has become compulsory for all children aged 3–6 (but this was already the case in practice since the 1990s). The *école maternelle*'s teachers have the same level of qualification, training, and status as primary school teachers. It is organized around three levels:

- The “*petite section*” for children aged 3–4 years
- The “*moyenne section*” for children aged 4–5 years
- The “*grande section*” for children aged 5–6 years (the equivalent of kindergarten)

Conversely to other countries, particularly those of northern and central Europe, the French *école maternelle* is characterized by an educational approach that is strongly oriented towards the academic aspect and preparation for later schooling (Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Veuthey, Marcoux, & Grange, 2016).

In order to further question the effects of this conception of an autonomous pupil on learning and on school inequalities from the first years of schooling, this chapter analyses the forms of autonomous work that can be observed in French *école maternelle* by comparing two types of situations: “autonomous workshops” and individual Montessori-type activities. The data upon which this chapter is based stems from two studies carried out via observations in *grande section* (kindergarten) classes. The first study is doctoral research (Richard-Bossez, 2015) based upon a field survey carried out in 2010–2011 in six socially contrasted kindergarten classes in a medium-sized town in the South of France (three classes from schools located in priority education zones with pupils from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, three more socially heterogeneous classes). The second study derives from research carried out during a collective project which enabled the observation in 2016–2017 of Montessori-type activities implemented in a kindergarten class located in a priority education area (Richard-Bossez, 2021). The point of view adopted is based on the sociology of pedagogy proposed by Basil Bernstein and his followers (Bernstein, 2007; Frandji & Vitale, 2008; Vitale & Exley, 2015) and on works about the construction of educational inequalities in preschools (Bautier, 2008; Joigneaux, 2009; Laparra & Margolinas, 2016; Millet & Croizet, 2016).

This contribution is divided into three parts. The first part will outline the theoretical and conceptual framework underlying the presented results. The second will put forward the most common situations of autonomous work

observable at the kindergarten level called “autonomous workshops”. The third one will describe the case of Montessori-type autonomous activities which are developed in certain classes. In a transversal way, the aim is to examine the methods used in these activities, the processes at work, and their effects on pupils’ learning.

### **Analysing autonomous school activities: The contributions of Basil Bernstein’s sociology of pedagogy**

British sociologist Basil Bernstein laid the foundations of a sociology of pedagogy (Bernstein, 2000) that makes it possible to describe the pedagogical process. In this sense, he wished to set himself apart from theories of reproduction, which he criticized for not questioning the pedagogical discourse itself and for considering it only as a neutral vector of class or power relations that are external to it. In doing so, Bernstein establishes pedagogy as a sociological object. For him, pedagogy is not a simple transmission relationship but, on the contrary, an instrument of symbolic control that regulates consciousness and identity. Several of his theoretical and conceptual propositions allow us to describe what greater autonomy given to the pupil in the pedagogical relationship produces. We will develop two of them: the notion of “invisible pedagogy” and the concept of “framing”.

#### ***Invisible pedagogy***

In 1973, Bernstein published an article entitled “Classes and Pedagogies: Visible and Invisible” in which he analysed the pedagogical model then in place in British preschools, which he named “invisible pedagogy” and which is characterized by:

- Implicit control of the pupil’s activity by the teacher
- A teacher’s role essentially based on setting up the context in which the pupils are to evolve
- A high degree of apparent autonomy for the child in his or her activities and relationships with others
- Little emphasis put on the transmission-acquisition of knowledge and methods
- Varied and diffuse assessment criteria, based on the pupil’s activity and relying on psychological explanations

In this pedagogical model, learning is seen as an invisible and tacit process in which activity and play are central elements.

For Bernstein, this pedagogy is a pedagogy of the “new middle classes” working in the area of cultural or symbolic regulation. It is a form of pedagogy

that anticipates a long period of schooling and a mode of communication based on relatively abstract meanings. The family model of socialization that corresponds to the type of pupil in tune with this pedagogy is that of a “nuclear family”, with a mother devoted to the education of her children. Because of these assumptions, which are close to a middle-class lifestyle, it has consequences for children from working-class families who are not prepared for these specific requirements. It is also a pedagogy that is less understandable to working-class parents and can create a disconnect between working-class families and school. Another problem raised by Bernstein relates to the break in pedagogical mode between preschool and primary school, which requires a shift in code for the pupil: such a shift is likely to be easier for middle-class children than for working-class ones. Thus, for Bernstein, “in the microcosm of the nursery or infant class, we can see embryonically the new forms of transmission of class relationships” (Bernstein, 1973, p. 24).

This work, which has since become a “classic”, therefore emphasizes the risks of social inequalities inherent in invisible pedagogies because of their stronger affinity with the educational practices of middle-class families. In the wake of this work, Bernstein sought to develop more general concepts that could describe all forms of pedagogical relationships.

### *The concept of framing*

The concept of framing is one of Bernstein’s central concepts: “it regulates relations within a context, it refers to relations between transmitters and acquirers, where acquirers acquire the principle of legitimate communication” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 12). It allows us to describe “*who controls what*” (ibid.). If the framing is strong, then it is the transmitter who controls the different elements of the pedagogical situation: the pedagogy can then be described as visible or explicit. If it is weak, it is, on the contrary, the learner who seems, at least in appearance, to have greater control over the situation: the pedagogy is then considered “invisible”. For Bernstein, framing is exercised on two types of inter-related discourses. On the one hand, there is the “regulative discourse”, which refers “to the forms that hierarchical relations take in the pedagogic relation and to expectations about conduct, character and manner” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 13). On the other hand, there is the “instructional discourse”, which corresponds to apprenticeships themselves (knowledge, specific skills). Regarding instructional discourse, control can be exercised over different elements: the selection of what is transmitted, the sequencing of learning over time, the expected pace of learning, and the criteria defining knowledge. This framing transmits the “rules of achievement”. These allow the learner to perceive, within the particular context in which he or she finds himself or herself, the criteria for producing what is expected of him or her.

For Bernstein, framing is always linked to a classification of knowledge, i.e., to the way in which knowledge is more or less strongly delimited. Classification

and framing can vary independently of one another, and their combination makes it possible to characterize different pedagogical codes. In Bernstein's theory, these concepts form the link between the micro-sociological and macro-sociological levels: classification conveys the power relations specific to a society and framing the social modalities of control. It should be noted, however, that in the works mobilizing Bernstein's models, these concepts are often used in a more descriptive and independent manner.

### ***Operationalizing the concept of framing to analyse autonomous activities in école maternelle***

To analyse the autonomous activities that we observed in kindergarten, I used the concept of framing. Methodologically, the cues used to characterize framing are both verbal and non-verbal. On the verbal level, I focused more particularly on the modes of address to others. Thus, imperative/injunctive forms were considered as strong framing modes. For example, a teacher addressing a pupil by saying "OK, now that's enough, stop talking and sit down" has been analysed as a strong framing of the regulating discourse. Conversely, open-ended questions, such as when a teacher asks the class "What should I do?" about an exercise sheet, were considered as weak framing of the instructional discourse. On the non-verbal level, the cues used were mainly gestures meant to show and summon physical action on others. For example, if a teacher grabbed a student by the shoulders to encourage him or her to sit on a chair, this was considered strong framing of the regulating discourse. In another example, the teacher's pointing out an error on an index card with her finger, without any other comment, was interpreted as a relatively weak framing of the instructional discourse because it was not explicit.

This allowed me to empirically question the effects of practices based on pupil autonomy in the two types of situations observed (autonomous workshops and Montessori-type activities), as I will show in the next two parts.

### **Autonomous workshops in French *école maternelle***

Traditionally, since at least the 1980s, learning activities in French *écoles maternelles* have been organized around the "workshop-grouping" form, i.e., collective activities when time slots during which all pupils are with the teacher alternate with activities in small groups of pupils, in "workshops", which are carried out successively by the different groups of pupils. These workshops can take different forms: directed workshops which take place under the constant presence of the teacher, semi-directed workshops where the teacher comes and goes, and autonomous workshops where the pupils have a task to carry out alone. In the latter case, the work to be done is presented by the teacher before the pupils do it alone. Once the work has been completed (usually a photocopied exercise sheet to be filled in), the pupils either show it directly to the

teacher or put it in a box provided for this purpose so that the teacher can check it and mark it afterwards. This type of organization allows for relatively little framing, if any. Several processes relating to the mode of presentation of the activities, the materials used, and the forms of support can be observed during these autonomous workshops.

### *A less knowledge-centred way of presenting activities*

Firstly, during these autonomous workshops, we can observe that the teacher tends to present the activities that the children will have to carry out later on their own by mobilizing the knowledge involved much less than the global activity in which the exercise is embedded and the tasks to be completed. This is often done by exemplifying and demonstrating the expected result.

The following extract is quite emblematic of this way of doing things. Here, the teacher explains to the pupils that they will have to complete an exercise sheet by classifying word labels in four circles according to the initial cipher they have in common and by noting the letter in question in a box next to each circle (“the label”):

So the [blue group], I'll show you: this is work with words, word labels that you have to cut out, all these labels, there, we cut on the line, there, straight on. We cut on the line and then there are four bubbles, but there are small labels, but nothing is written on the labels, so you have to look at the first letter of each word, there are words that start with the letter P, words with the letter [she says the names of the letters with the pupils]. [...] In one of the bubbles, I'm going to put all the words that start with the letter P, this one, that one, that one, I'm looking for, there must be 1, 2, 3 [shows the words]. I'm putting them here [...] so listen carefully, I'm explaining. The three that start with P, I put them in the same bubble, and here I write P [...], the three that start with C, I put all three together [...] carrot [...] cauliflower and then cabbage and courgette there, in the little label, I put the letter C. The three that start with R: radish, rice and [...] and grapes (“raisin” in French), I'm going to put them here and I'll put the letter R. And the last ones are those that start with F: strawberry (“fraise” in French), fava bean.

Two characteristic elements of this mode of presentation can be highlighted. First, the degree of abstraction in the teacher's speech is relatively low. This can be seen in the importance given to the description of the material (bubbles, word labels, explanation of tasks to be done, etc.). The mode of presentation is therefore very contextualized and relative to the sheet used. We then observe that the framing of the knowledge to be mobilized is relatively weak. Thus, there is no use of specialized terms, such as “initial” for example. On the other hand, the procedural aspect is much more accentuated, indicating how to cut

out the labels and the tasks to be carried out. Here, the demonstration even goes so far as to present the pupils with the whole of the work to be carried out since the words are all indicated by the teacher, thus illustrating what didacticists call the “Topaze effect”,<sup>1</sup> i.e., a situation where the expected answer is so suggested that it ends up being given away without the need to resort to other elements.

Other modes of presentation of activities that are much more centred on knowledge can be observed in the classes (cf. Richard-Bossez, 2020b), but these are much more frequent when the teacher is more continuously present with the group of pupils. Thus, the fact of giving pupils a task they have to carry out independently seems to induce a mode of presentation that tends to make the knowledge in question less visible; as a consequence, it risks making access to it more difficult for pupils who have not been made familiar with it in other contexts. Indeed, as Bernstein had already shown in the 1970s, and as other studies have since confirmed (in particular Bautier, 2008), focusing on “doing” more than on “learning”, without making the underlying knowledge explicit, can mislead pupils about what is expected of them in school and prevent them from accessing the required knowledge.

### ***Activities more frequently organized around photocopied worksheets***

Secondly, we can see that most of the activities in the autonomous workshops are based on photocopied worksheets. Lahire has also emphasized the role that objects play in the desire to build autonomy at school:

A pedagogy which bypasses the “frontal” strategy of the lecture in order to set up different activities according to the pupils or groups of pupils and to favour “autonomous” (individual) work without direct help cannot do otherwise than to rely upon devices resting on objectified knowledge.

*(Lahire, 2001, p. 157, our translation)*

Thus, if the teacher is not physically with certain groups of pupils, the sheets constitute a sort of “relay” to make up for this absence. This is not without effects on the knowledge targeted (Richard-Bossez, 2016).

Indeed, an analysis of the worksheets used in the classes in our sample shows that they tend to approach knowledge on the basis of specific tasks that are not very varied. Thus, among the sheets we collected, instructions of four different kinds group together almost all the tasks required of pupils.<sup>2</sup> The most frequent task is “Cut and paste” (in 17 out of 43 sheets). It corresponds to labels representing drawings, words, or letters that the pupils have to cut out and then place in a spot corresponding to the given instructions. Three other instructions are also relatively common, although to a lesser degree than the previous one: “circle”, “colour”, and “write” (respectively, 8, 9, and 10 times in the 43 sheets examined). In these cases, the aim is to select specific elements from a greater



whole or to write or trace words or signs. Four other instructions are also present in our corpus but appear only once in the entire corpus of sheets: “Cross out”, “Complete”, “Organize in order”, “Connect”. Thus, while the number of sheets is large, the tasks they propose are relatively limited and repetitive.

Thus, the use of photocopied worksheets places more emphasis on what the pupil must do than on what he or she must know, as other authors have pointed out (Bautier, 2008). This also leads, indirectly, to an emphasis on the type of knowledge necessary to lead to a task that can be carried out through a worksheet. This emphasis on doing leads to a focus on learning that is often more technical. For example, in the area of literacy learning, greater emphasis is placed on certain areas: the “alphabetical principle” (sheets proposing work on words, sentences, or letters), the “sounds of language” (sheets relating to a specific sound, the association of sounds or the place of a sound in a word), and writing (of letters, words or sentences). Activities relating to the social functions of writing or understanding of texts are much less present in the activity sheets. At the same time, this also tends to exclude other types of tasks such as the manipulation of objects, board games based on notions relating to literacy, or activities based solely on language mediation for example.

Joigneaux (2009) has shown that exercise sheets in *école maternelle* are becoming increasingly complex graphically. We can also observe that the graphic elements present on the sheets have the function of implicitly guiding the pupil’s actions. This is the case with dots indicating where the writing should begin, or dotted lines, lines, or spaces intended to guide the drawing or pasting of labels. These graphic elements can also have a self-correcting function insofar as the number of spaces provided gives an indication of the number of elements to be placed there. The “labels” meant to be pasted on the sheets have the characteristic of isolating various units on mobile material, which can be drawings, letters, syllables, words, or even sentences. As a result, they allow for greater focus on these units by dissociating them from the other units present on the sheet. However, as Gachet-Delaborde (2009) points out, the fact that these different units are integrated into the same type of medium (a rectangle of paper) can also potentially cause confusion between the different types of units.

Thus, the use of worksheets in autonomous workshops tends to reinforce the technical aspect of learning to the detriment of its more cognitive aspect.

### ***Near absence of support for pupils***

Thirdly, as in all activities observable in *école maternelle* classes, we can discern very different forms of appropriation of learning activities by pupils, more or less close to school expectations. The particularity of autonomous workshops is that these differences in appropriation are less likely to be the subject of support. This is due to two interrelated reasons.

On the one hand, because the most frequent exchanges within the autonomous workshops take place among pupils, a very frequent form of exchange among peers during autonomous workshops is copying. Such situations of copying among peers are sometimes a last resort when a pupil doesn't manage to do the exercise alone and doesn't get outside help. This is the case of Fatou who has to colour the drawings of the words containing the O sound.<sup>3</sup> She starts by asking, "‘Escargot’, do you hear O?" As she does not get any answer, she says thoughtfully, "I don't know anymore" and looks at her neighbour who has coloured the drawing in question. Some pupils are even able to copy from a pupil who is sitting opposite them and whose sheet is therefore "mirrored" onto their own. These copying situations are generally not detected by the teacher who validates these answers as being those of the pupil himself or herself, thus preventing any possibility of feedback on what the pupil has not understood. Forms of mutual help among pupils can also be observed, but these raise several questions. Firstly, because the help requested by a pupil is not always granted, as we have just seen with Fatou's example. Secondly, the cognitive operations underlying such help often don't correspond to the cognitive processes expected in school. For example, Soria starts by asking her group, "What's it called?" by showing the drawing of the gorilla. Elio replies, "Gorilla". She then asks, "Can you hear the O?" Samir replies, "Yes, in 'go'". Elio retorts and says, "Well, no (it's not there)". Samir repeats "go" in disbelief. Soria replies, "Well, no". Samir laughs in an awkward manner. These exchanges among peers, therefore, have relatively weak and sometimes counterproductive effects on targeted school learning.

On the other hand, this form of support is less frequent because exchanges with the teacher are also at their lowest in the autonomous workshops. In some cases, the teacher may not monitor the pupils at all and will only check the work done afterwards (by annotating the sheet, for example). In other cases, the teacher may drop in randomly during or at the end of the workshop. Conversely, in other, more directed forms of workshops, we see that these moments of teacher-pupil interaction are precisely key moments in the possibilities of revision of the pupils' knowledge acquisition (Richard-Bossez, 2020a). During autonomous workshops, when moments of teacher support occur, they are often shorter and faster than in other types of workshops. In these situations, it is almost impossible for the teacher to identify the pupils' difficulties and the operations they have implemented.

In this way, autonomous workshops provide less opportunity than more directed forms of activity to revise pupils' responses when they do not correspond to the intended learning situation. As a result, for pupils who have not yet mastered the knowledge involved, this type of activity does not provide the necessary resources for them to re-examine the knowledge they previously acquired and develop new forms of it.

### **Individual Montessori-type activities**

Since the 2010s in France, there has been a movement to disseminate practices inspired by Montessori pedagogy in state schools (Huard, 2019), whereas they had previously remained quite limited to the more socially selective public schools. The teacher I was able to observe in 2016–2017 is very representative of these new practices (Richard-Bosse, 2021). Every morning in her classroom, the teacher sets up individual Montessori-type activities. Compared to more ordinary workshops, these activities are characterized by:

- A free choice of activities by the child: the material is made available, and the pupil chooses what he or she wants to work on, provided that the teacher has already presented it to him once. Pupils decide for themselves how long they want to work on the activity and may change whenever they want.
- More individual work using material to be handled and designed to be self-correcting. This material is not exclusively Montessori material but also material designed by the teacher or produced by other publishers.

### ***Quantitative and qualitative differentiations***

During my observations, two forms of processes likely to induce educational inequalities could be discerned in the Montessori-based activities.

The first form is quantitative. It relates to the quantity of school activities carried out by pupils. Some pupils, namely those who are already best in tune with school expectations, carry out several complete activities during Montessori-inspired activities periods, whereas others, generally those who are not – or not yet – in a school learning logic, do much less and/or do not complete them. The example of two pupils with strongly contrasting kinds of behaviour illustrates this point, which may be observed in varying degrees for other pupils in the class. Léa is one of the “very good” students in the class. The teacher says that she already knows how to do things that she has not yet shown her, which suggests that she is already familiar with many activities at school that she probably does at home. During the workshops, she usually does several activities in succession, which she conscientiously completes. The teacher says of her, “Léa, she doesn’t stop”. She is also very demanding and will often ask the teacher for specific work to be done. For example, she asks if she can write the date on the board by herself, even though this is not a planned workshop, or asks the teacher to show her how to write her first name in cursive letters because she cannot do it by herself. In contrast, Djamel, a boy from the same class, was described as an “agitated” pupil who “sucks up” the teacher’s energy and lives in a complicated family situation. He carries out fewer workshop stints to completion or tends to flit from one activity to another without completing

them. He hardly ever asks the teacher for help, and when she encourages him to participate, he generally does not comply. Through these two examples, we can highlight a first process of differentiation linked to a specificity of Montessori-type activities: the fact that each pupil chooses their activity and the duration of it. This results in a strongly differentiated solicitation of the pupils, which leads some to be more exposed to school activities – and therefore to the learning that they convey – than others. Compared to classes where more “classic” workshops are organized around a single activity, Montessori-type workshops tend to reinforce the differences among pupils. For the most “demanding” pupils, who generally do not have the opportunity to carry out several activities in the more traditional workshops, this allows them to increase their exposure to school learning and their practice of the exercises proposed. On the other hand, for pupils with fewer academic demands, who often do not spontaneously go for the activities proposed in the framework of the Montessori-type activities, the more traditional workshops allow for greater attendance of learning activities by the fact that they are “imposed” upon them without any possibility of choice.

Another more qualitative form of differentiation concerning the cognitive nature of the activities chosen can be observed. Indeed, some pupils (who are generally the same as those who follow several autonomous workshops in a row) prefer the most “academic” activities: learning to write words based on the sounds produced by the letters, classifying words according to the sounds or syllables they contain, working on numbers and quantities, etc. This is further reinforced by the fact that the same pupils will sometimes call out to the teacher for a particular task (learning to write a word, asking for a model to do an activity, etc.) when those proposed do not correspond to their expectations. During this time, other pupils choose less academic activities: pouring different types of seeds or liquids into containers, manipulating modelling clay, doing a jigsaw puzzle with a small number of pieces, drawing, etc. Thus, while Léa practices making lines of Js in cursive writing, corrects herself by erasing the letters that do not seem to fit, and imitates her teacher who circles the most successful letters, Djamel, on the other hand, plays with modelling clay, making balls that he throws around the classroom without considering the proposed model cards.

This form of differentiation, relating to the cognitive operations mobilized by the pupils, is further reinforced by the possibilities of “diverting” the material proposed. Thus, certain activities can aim at learning which, in the practices of certain pupils, is subjected to a deviation towards a more playful activity or carried out on a register which is not the one that was intended. This can be observed, for example, when a pupil manipulates geometric shapes and comes to consider them as characters in an imaginary game and makes them speak or when a pupil reproduces letters, but without respecting the conventional sense of the writing. This can also be seen in the use of Montessori materials, which are considered self-correcting. This is the case with the red

and blue bars intended to work on the sequence of numbers from 1 to 10, which pupils are supposed to align in a progressive “staircase” starting from the same point and which can be diverted (voluntarily or not) to make a pyramid or be transformed into an imaginary sword. In the same way, lines of pearls that have to be arranged in boxes according to the number of pearls they contain can be arranged loosely by some pupils. As can be seen, for some, the operations mobilized will be essentially procedural, whereas for others they will be more intellectual and more “academically profitable” for the continuation of their schooling. These processes were also observed by G. Leroy (2020) in his work on “Montessori-inspired practices”. These forms of diversion can also be observed in the more “traditional” workshops, particularly when they take place outside the constant presence of the teacher but much less frequently in the so-called directed workshops.

### *The central issue of monitoring and supporting student activity*

These differentiating processes are based to a large extent on the fact that these Montessori-inspired activities are subject to little framing and, consequently, little scaffolding. This is because the teacher is usually busy presenting activities to a few pupils and can therefore hardly monitor directly the activities carried out by the others.

To illustrate this point, here is an observed sequence involving Léa and Djamel, whose strongly differentiated school attitudes were seen earlier:

Léa is placed on a mat with cards showing a picture and the names of different emotions. She has to match word labels with the names of the emotions on them. She compares word for word the name written on the cards and on the labels before placing the label under the corresponding card. Djamel voluntarily passes and moves all of Léa’s labels. The teacher asks him to help Léa put them back in place. Djamel first refuses, then when the teacher gets closer to him, starts putting the labels back at random before announcing, “Here we go!” Léa tells him “No, that’s not it” and goes to find the teacher. Again, he leaves, but the teacher calls him back, explains what is expected and asks him what he has to do. He replies “look at the model”. The teacher then takes a word label and tells him, “You have to put at least that one on”. She places the first label under the first card and asks him if it is the right word, he answers “no”; she then makes him compare it to the other words. He thinks he has found the solution but confuses “happy” and “sad” because of the dot over the i and j in those French words. The teacher makes him compare the words letter by letter and he realizes his mistake. He finds the right place. She hands him the next word and then a third, which he places correctly. At this point, the teacher is called up by another student. Djamel starts to get up, the teacher sees him and says “continue, continue” and gives him another label.

He continues to place the labels. At the end of the activity, the teacher asks Djamel to go and get his notebook to write down what he has done. A little later, he goes to get a box containing some material and asks, “teacher, can you explain this to me?”

This long extract allows us to grasp how a pupil like Djamel, whose behaviour is generally quite far from what is implicitly expected during independent workshop time (refusal of activity, flitting about, diversions, etc.), can adopt a very different attitude, much more in line with school expectations, when the teacher exercises a stronger control over his activity and offers support adapted to the difficulties he encounters. This type of observation, revealing moments of learning for pupils *a priori* considered to be in great difficulty in the classroom, was also observed in more ordinary classes. This leads us to emphasize that the support phases constitute real moments of immersion in learning for these pupils. However, they require the teacher to be available to interact with them and to accept a more constraining approach than that generally advocated in Montessori pedagogy, in particular the fact of not waiting for a “sensitive period” in the child. As G. Leroy underlines it, among teachers practicing Montessori pedagogy, “the idea of heterogeneous rhythms [sometimes] opens the way to resignation towards the weakest” (2020, p. 135; our translation).

### ***The strong commitment of the students in autonomous Montessori-based activities***

Finally, I would like to emphasize another process observed during the Montessori-type activities in the class surveyed: that of the strong involvement of the pupils in the activities proposed to them. In this area, a significant difference can be noted in comparison with the classes run in a more classical manner. Indeed, it is striking to observe that in this class, the commitment is much more obvious than in the other classes I studied. This can be seen in the calmness that often surrounds these Montessori-type activity periods and in the fact that many pupils do not move when the recess bell rings, preferring to continue their activity rather than go and play outside, or even ask to stay in the classroom to do other activities during recess time. The implementation of these Montessori-inspired activities thus seems to enable many pupils to mobilize their energy and resources towards learning more than other types of organization but does not guarantee that this learning will be systematically achieved.

Thus, in the Montessori-type workshops that I have observed, we can discern processes of openness to learning that are not very frequent in other types of functioning. These openings concern the pupils’ commitment to the proposed activities and learning for those pupils who are attracted to and have already mastered the school expectations and for whom the workshops

constitute a stimulating and more intensive form of training. On the other hand, we can also observe processes of refusal of learning that are more marked than in more ordinary forms of functioning, particularly for pupils who have not mastered the expected intellectual procedures; they remain in a cognitive register of lesser academic profitability when the organization in an autonomous form allows for less control of the activity by the teacher than in other types of functioning. In these individual activities of the Montessori type, we find, on the one hand, the same difficulties as in the autonomous workshops linked to the weak supervision by the teacher and consequently to the little support offered for the pupils' learning. But on the other hand, there are also forms of differentiation in terms of exposure to school knowledge, which means that some pupils will attend these learning sessions much more than others.

### Conclusion

Sociological research has long emphasized the risks of creating inequalities in connection with the development of autonomous educational *dispositifs* (Bernstein, 1973; Lahire, 2005; Joigneaux, 2014; Périer, 2014; Durler, 2015). This is due, in particular, to the socially implicit stakes of “invisible pedagogies”, which are closer to the forms of socialization of middle-class children than to those of working-class children and which may consequently prevent the latter from perceiving school expectations when these remain implicit. As Bernard Lahire puts it,

These pedagogies of autonomy are above all based on an unspoken law that could be formulated as follows: “Let the person who enters the school carry within him the dispositions to act and think in the direction expected at school”.

*(2005, p. 346, our translation)*

The comparison of the autonomous workshops traditionally present in *école maternelle* classes and the new forms of individual activities inspired by Montessori pedagogy makes it possible to highlight processes underlying the autonomous activities which produce school inequalities. A first process, which is found in the types of autonomous activities observed, relates to the weak cognitive framing of activities inherent in autonomous arrangements and the little scaffolding possibilities that result from this. A second process relates to the accentuation of the gaps in exposure to the most academic knowledge in the case of Montessori-type activities, which propose a form of autonomy going as far as the choice of activities and their duration. These processes tend to close off the possibilities of revising learning for pupils who have not already mastered it because of their previous school or family learning experience and thus run the risk of accentuating inequalities within classes from the first years of schooling.

## Notes

- 1 In reference to the eponymous play by French author Marcel Pagnol and its main character, a schoolteacher named Topaze who, in the first scene of the play, gives a dictation to his pupils by inducing the spelling of words through the exaggerated pronunciation of some final silent letters (“the sheepssss”).
- 2 N.B.: Several instructions may be present on the same sheet.
- 3 All names have been pseudonymized.

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