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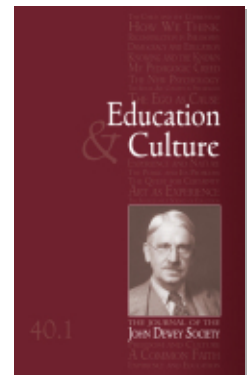
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Issues

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# Rediscovering Dewey's Concept of "Inquiry" in Francophone Literature

## A Lexicographical Analysis of Scientific Production Pertaining to Education and Training Issues

*Joris Thievenaz, Olivier Las-Vergnas, and Nawel Kedidah Chair*

**Abstract** This article explores the resurgence and application of John Dewey's concept of "inquiry" within Francophone literature, particularly in the context of education and training. Dewey's "Theory of Inquiry," first introduced in 1938, is examined through a comprehensive lexicographical analysis of 291 French-language scientific publications. The study identifies six main classes of publications that utilize Dewey's concept in diverse ways, ranging from philosophical analyses to practical applications in education and professional training. The analysis highlights the varied and evolving uses of the concept, reflecting a dynamic interplay between theoretical foundations and practical implementations. The findings suggest that while Dewey's theory is increasingly referenced, its applications remain fragmented, necessitating a deeper understanding of its integration into different research contexts. The study provides insights into the scientific dynamics within the Francophone educational research community and proposes further exploration of these trends in the English literature.

**Résumé en français** Cet article explore la résurgence et l'application du concept de "l'enquête" de John Dewey dans la littérature francophone, en particulier dans le contexte de l'éducation et de la formation. La "Théorie de l'enquête" de Dewey, introduite pour la première fois en 1938, est examinée à travers une analyse lexicographique approfondie de 291 publications scientifiques en langue

française. L'étude identifie six principales classes de publications qui utilisent le concept de Dewey de diverses manières, allant des analyses philosophiques aux applications pratiques dans l'éducation et la formation professionnelle. L'analyse met en lumière les utilisations variées et évolutives du concept, reflétant une interaction dynamique entre les fondements théoriques et les mises en œuvre pratiques. Les résultats suggèrent que, bien que la théorie de Dewey soit de plus en plus référencée, ses applications restent fragmentées, nécessitant une compréhension plus approfondie de son intégration dans différents contextes de recherche. L'étude fournit des éclairages sur les dynamiques scientifiques au sein de la communauté de recherche éducative francophone et propose d'explorer davantage ces tendances dans la littérature anglo-saxonne.

**Keywords** inquiry, John Dewey, lexicographical analysis, Francophone literature, education and training, enquête, analyse lexicographique, littérature francophone, éducation et formation

AMONG THE CONCEPTS CURRENTLY BEING REDISCOVERED AND REVIVED IN THE field of education and training research in several countries is that of “inquiry,” in the sense given by John Dewey in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.<sup>1</sup> This mature work of synthesis can be considered as the culmination of the intellectual trajectory of one of the founding fathers of American pragmatism, and a great intellectual of the early twentieth century.

More than eighty years after its publication, John Dewey's theoretical approach, far from becoming obsolete, is generating new analytical frameworks. These frameworks are supported by innovative research methodologies and the integration of contemporary theoretical propositions. While Dewey's seminal influence has remained a constant in Anglophone educational discourse,<sup>2</sup> the Francophone examination of his core works, particularly his *Theory of Inquiry*, presents a fresh opportunity. It invites novel inquiries pertinent to evolving challenges, casting Dewey's discussions on experience, learning, and education—in school settings, workplace environments, vocational training, and both public and private life spheres—in a newly invigorated light.

In France, the “return to Dewey” phenomenon<sup>3</sup> and, more specifically, the “functional rereading of the inquiry”<sup>4</sup> for addressing current education and training challenges provoke several inquiries. This reengagement raises questions about the utilization of Dewey's theoretical framework: What applications does this approach find? In what contexts and with what objectives is this framework employed? How does it interact with other concepts or theoretical approaches? What are the varied

goals (epistemic, praxeological) that these studies aim to achieve? Can one identify predominant trends or “research families” adopting this perspective? More broadly and significantly: does this denote a unique scientific application of Dewey’s theory in the Francophone education and training sector?<sup>5</sup> If so, what characterizes its distinctiveness?

This article embarks from such probing questions and conducts a systematic lexicographical analysis<sup>6</sup> of the concept of inquiry<sup>7</sup> within the Francophone sphere of current scientific output in the humanities. Using this lexical clustering method, this contribution highlights the major scientific and academic trends in the use of the concept of inquiry in the French-speaking world, but also in doing so compares its different disciplinary cultures of appropriation. This mapping and analysis work thus makes it possible, beyond the simple exercise of quantification, to highlight underlying and more fundamental processes relating to the diversity of uses of this survey concept.

This study aims to identify and categorize the diverse applications of the inquiry concept for the first time in the Francophone world. This endeavor transcends the basic lexicographical or bibliometric analysis to more deeply investigate what might define the boundaries, essence, and distinctiveness of a Francophone research tradition in the humanities and social sciences, grounded explicitly in John Dewey’s concept of inquiry. This analysis further extends into a broader epistemological examination, taking as its focal point the concepts, methods, and categories of thought prevalently engaged within Francophone scientific discourse related to education and training.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, this article concisely introduces the concept of inquiry and the circumstances enabling its resurgence within the past two decades in French-language research on education and training. Subsequently, the research methodology employed to pinpoint, define, and chart the applications of the inquiry concept is detailed. In the final section, the findings of this study are disclosed, based on the examination of a corpus comprising 291 articles. Utilizing Iramuteq software,<sup>9</sup> this analysis uncovers six classes of publications that exhibit lexically similar themes.

## QUESTIONING REREADINGS AND CONTEMPORARY USES OF THE CONCEPT OF INQUIRY: THE CHALLENGES OF RESEARCH

After a phase of keen enthusiasm sparked by their initial French translations<sup>10</sup> and the rise of active pedagogies, which was then succeeded by a period<sup>11</sup> of relative oblivion from the 1980s, the contributions of John Dewey’s thought in the humanities and

social sciences have again been revitalized over the past twenty years, particularly in French-speaking research on education and training.<sup>12</sup> This resurgence is notably true for his *Theory of Inquiry* (1938), now frequently employed as a conceptual framework in numerous studies concerning learning and the construction of experience.

This renewed interest transcends mere “rereadings” of this pivotal work in Dewey’s philosophical oeuvre. Instead, it represents a deeper rediscovery in the context of contemporary challenges pervading the realms of education, work, training, health, and beyond. Before delving into the varied applications of this theoretical approach, it is crucial to revisit its foundational principles and underlying assumptions.

## The Concept of “Inquiry” in Dewey’s Philosophy of Experience

John Dewey’s (1859–1952) oeuvre is monumental, both in terms of its sheer volume and the breadth of fundamental issues it addresses.<sup>13</sup> Dewey, a pioneer of American pragmatism<sup>14</sup> and a preeminent intellectual figure at the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, explored a diverse array of subjects including education; the artistic creation process; the physiological, emotional, and cognitive processes underpinning behavior; and public participation in the democratic process, among others.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the varied themes throughout his work, a central motif of *experience*—its expansion and comprehension—unifies his contributions. As G. Deledalle, Dewey’s primary French translator and one of his foremost scholars, observed, “Dewey’s work is considerable, but it is always the same book that he wrote.”<sup>16</sup> Dewey’s philosophy could be succinctly encapsulated by his own description as “a philosophy of experience, by experience, for experience.”<sup>17</sup>

Contrary to the common, albeit limited, perception within the Francophone educational community, Dewey’s philosophy extends well beyond mere pedagogical concerns.<sup>18</sup> While his famous dictum “learning by doing” is frequently cited to encapsulate his philosophy, it more accurately represents a comprehensive philosophical, psychological, and political exploration of human experience across its biological, cognitive, educational, and existential dimensions.

At the core of a versatile yet consistently coherent philosophy, termed the “anthropology of experience,” lies John Dewey’s concept of inquiry, a notion he refined over more than four decades and encapsulated in his book, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938).<sup>19</sup> This work, a synthesis of his philosophical exploration, introduces a universal principle of knowledge. Dewey posits that human growth and development occur when individuals, confronted with uncertain, obscure, or problematic situations, embark on an intellectual process aimed at restoring equilibrium. This process, in turn, reestablishes a continuity of experience: “Inquiry is the controlled or

directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.”<sup>20</sup>

In this work, framed as a treatise on logic, Dewey sets forth a universal theory of human action and development. This theory is predicated on the notion that, irrespective of context, the nature of the disturbance, or the age and knowledge level of the individual, it is the encounter with a disruptive situation and the resulting discontinuity in experience that compels an individual to undertake an investigation. The purpose of this investigation is to reestablish equilibrium within the situation and, in the process, generate new forms of knowledge. Put simply, humans learn by confronting challenges or problems that necessitate their investigative efforts: “A person, or more broadly, an organism, becomes a knowing subject by virtue of engaging in the operations of controlled investigation.”<sup>21</sup>

By employing the term “inquiry” (translated as “enquête” in French), the author’s goal is to present a universal framework for understanding experience, exploring the conditions and extents to which we learn across various contexts—be it in school, during training, within work situations, in daily life, or throughout leisure activities—especially when faced with situations requiring characterization. Dewey describes indeterminate situations as rife with confusion, obscurity, and conflict, necessitating clarification: “We do not know, as we say, where to turn; we grope and fumble. We escape from the muddled condition only by turning to other situations and searching them for a cue.”<sup>22</sup> The significant appeal (and occasionally the operational challenge) of this approach is its universality. Dewey did not intend to limit the scope of scientific inquiry to research conducted in laboratories but sought to apply this method more broadly to conceptualize human action across all life’s spaces and situations: “The existence of inquiries is not a matter of doubt. They enter every area of life and every aspect of every area.”<sup>23</sup>

*Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* is the culmination of Dewey’s philosophical, psychological and pedagogical thinking. The fruit of many years of reflection, it was published after several increasingly mature works (*Studies In Logical Theory* [1903], *How We Think* [1910], *Essays in Experimental Logic* [1916], and *The Quest for Certainty* [1929]) in which the author gradually elaborated what would later become the “common schema” of inquiry, applicable to all spheres of existence (scientific, technical, everyday life, et cetera).<sup>24</sup> The aim was to identify the universal foundations of the investigative process, through which human beings produce new forms of knowledge in situations that enrich their experience. The investigative process, as formalized in 1938, is presented as a model for the intelligibility of all kinds of situations in which the individual or a group of people is called upon to explore and then illuminate a dimension of reality for the needs of the continuity of their action, and in so doing

to elaborate new knowledge about the world: “The way in which men do ‘think’ denotes, as it is here interpreted, simply the ways in which men at a given time carry on their inquiries.”<sup>25</sup> If *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) is indeed a treatise on logic (in which the author sets out to distance himself from the traditional logic of Aristotle, as well as from the contemporary logic of Russell [1919]), this work represents a fundamental contribution to the processes by which human experience is regulated and constructed. This proposition serves as the foundation for many contemporary studies in education and training which employ this approach.<sup>26</sup>

## A Current, Diffuse, and Multifaceted Phenomenon of “Return to Inquiry”

The resurgence of interest in John Dewey’s insights for addressing contemporary challenges in education and training, spurred by the recent translation of several of his key works into French,<sup>27</sup> is catalyzing renewed enthusiasm within Francophone research communities. Whether by directly embracing the theoretical construct of inquiry or by invoking it in a more segmented manner for analytical purposes, Dewey’s pivotal concept of the theory of experience is undergoing a reevaluation of its analytical capabilities by a diverse array of researchers in the domain. For these scholars, the objective is to reexamine the issue of experience and its formulation under a new light, leveraging a comprehensive theory applicable across a broad spectrum of contexts, subjects, and audiences.

The concept of inquiry and its underlying theoretical framework are notably evident in adult education, especially in approaches associated with “analyse de l’activité” (activity analysis) as recognized in the Francophone world. Drawing from John Dewey’s foundational ideas, numerous studies explore a variety of domains such as the healthcare sector,<sup>28</sup> assessment of prior learning (“VAE” in French),<sup>29</sup> educators’ activities,<sup>30</sup> and the realm of artistic creation,<sup>31</sup> among others. Additionally, some research adopts the inquiry model with a pedagogical-didactic intent.<sup>32</sup> From this angle, the focus extends beyond mere activity analysis to the creation of environments, tools, curricula, and training frameworks that are inspired by the inquiry paradigm. Another application of inquiry involves its use in epistemological discussions<sup>33</sup> aimed at more precisely defining the unique characteristics of Educational Sciences (“Sciences de l’éducation et de la formation,” or SEF) as a distinct discipline within the French scientific community, including its specific investigative approaches, data collection methods.

This phenomenon of infatuation with and rediscovery of the concept of inquiry in the French-speaking field of educational research has given rise to multiple references to this theoretical postulate. As Thievenaz and Fabre have shown in their recent

French review dedicated to this topic,<sup>34</sup> Dewey's inquiry theory is mobilized in a wide variety of approaches, fields and objects of study, such as the philosophy of education and pedagogy,<sup>35</sup> the study of evaluation tools<sup>36</sup> of adult education,<sup>37</sup> et cetera.

Far from constituting a homogeneous field, this literature on the contrary contains a plurality of modes of recourse to the concept of inquiry: sometimes as the theoretical framework of the study, sometimes as a distant paradigmatic reference, sometimes in an opportunistic strategy of quoting a recognized author, et cetera. Beyond the plurality of objects investigated, it is more fundamentally the great diversity of modes of recourse (more or less central, explicit and argued) to the concept of inquiry that makes this phenomenon difficult to apprehend. The wide variety of uses of this theoretical approach in education and training tends to create a fragmented, diffuse, and ultimately incomprehensible vision of the concept of inquiry as formalized by John Dewey. In France, students following a bachelor's, master's, or doctorate course who wish to refer to this approach often testify to their great difficulty in finding their place in this fragmented scientific landscape.

Despite the observable resurgence of interest in the concept of inquiry within the Francophone scientific community, it proves challenging to categorize the diverse applications of this term and, more critically, to ascertain if these uses denote a distinct approach or intent in invoking this theory among Francophone researchers in education and training. This difficulty underscores the complexity of understanding how Dewey's concept of inquiry is adapted and integrated into various research contexts, highlighting the need for a deeper examination to reveal any unique characteristics of its adoption in the Francophone educational and training research landscape.

## The Challenge of Identifying, Delimiting, Quantifying, and Better Understanding Contemporary Uses of Inquiry and the Different Registers of Meaning in Which It Is Used

The resurgence of a concept or theory within a scientific milieu often prompts a deeper inquiry not just into its (re)new(ed) applications, but also into what these trends signify about the discipline itself and its ongoing developments. This renewed interest extends beyond mere enthusiasm or the facilitation provided by translations, instead uncovering a more profound necessity to approach problems differently, to alter the treatment of collected field data, and to articulate findings through alternative theoretical lenses. Thus, the utilization of a concept—now serving as a tool—acts as a barometer for the evolution of scientific culture within a specific sociocultural context. However, the challenge lies in identifying, distinguishing, characterizing, and mapping the varied applications of the concept of inquiry to gain a comprehensive understanding. The landscape revealed is not one of unified scientific

consensus but rather a tapestry of contextual references and theoretical diversity. This complexity is compounded by uncertainties regarding whether the concept is predominantly invoked within specific domains or represents a broader, possibly transdisciplinary trend. Further complicating the picture is how this concept coexists with other theoretical frameworks from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, highlighting the intricate interplay within the scientific community's evolving dynamics.

The Francophone scientific domain engaging with John Dewey's theory of inquiry presents itself as diverse, complex, and multifaceted, rendering its comprehensive characterization a challenging endeavor. This recognition, coupled with the theoretical and epistemological implications it entails, prompted the decision by the first author of this article to collaborate during 2022 and 2023 with a colleague on a review focused on dissecting the engagement with Dewey's oeuvre in French-language research on education and training.<sup>38</sup> This examination delves into the foundational aspects, reception, and applications of Dewey's work. Given space constraints, for a more detailed exploration readers are directed to this review, which is also available in an English version.<sup>39</sup>

Accompanying this effort, a lexicographical analysis was conducted on the extant literature concerning this subject. The current paper is now published separately to provide access to this specific lexicometric work conducted according to a tried-and-tested method.<sup>40</sup> We hypothesize that such a mapping endeavor, in itself, might elucidate various classes of publications, and thus the distinct research orientations wherein Dewey's theory is applied. This endeavor aims at clarifying the scientific employment of this approach within our scholarly domain, even though it is acknowledged that this mapping cannot substitute for the nuanced, human analysis detailed in the aforementioned summary.

## LEXICOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF REFERENCES TO THE CONCEPT OF *INQUIRY* IN THE FRANCOPHONE LANDSCAPE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To accurately situate, delimit, and describe the utilization of John Dewey's concept of inquiry within French-language scientific literature on education and training, a structured methodology for gathering and systematically analyzing the relevant publications is essential. This endeavor unfolded in two key phases:

1. **Compilation of the Textual Corpus:** The initial phase involved assembling a comprehensive textual corpus that included the titles, publication dates, and authors of the scientific works under consideration. This corpus formed the

- foundational database for the subsequent analysis, capturing the scope and scale of Dewey's concept of inquiry within the targeted scholarly domain.
2. Clustering and Correlation Analysis within the Corpus: The second phase focused on identifying and exploring correlations within this corpus among authors, publication dates, and thematic orientations of the works. This step was facilitated by examining the lexicons employed within the titles of the publications, enabling a detailed mapping of the relationships between different authors, temporal trends in the research, and the thematic areas being explored in relation to Dewey's concept of inquiry.

## First Step: The Constitution of the Textual Corpus

The initial step involved creating a bibliographic database that aggregated all French-language scientific publications referencing John Dewey's "inquiry theory" model within the context of education and training. For the lexicological analysis of the inquiry concept's applications, the selection of articles followed a methodical approach encompassing two stages: an exploratory phase involving an electronic search, and a subsequent phase of nuanced human reading analysis.

A search conducted through Google Scholar,<sup>41</sup> aimed at finding references that concurrently mention the three French terms "théorie de l'enquête," "Dewey," and "éducation" in their titles, abstracts, or keywords, was facilitated by the bibliographic search tool Publish or Perish.<sup>42</sup> This tool automates searches on Google Scholar, streamlining the identification process of relevant literature. The analysis was structured into four distinct time periods: (1) before 2008, (2) 2008–14, (3) 2015–17, and (4) 2018–21.<sup>43</sup> Collectively, the documents identified through this query form a comprehensive corpus of 1767 references.

For each of the defined periods, the corresponding data files underwent a uniform processing procedure. This involved the application of a manual analysis grid equipped with various exclusion criteria. The initial step entailed identifying and removing duplicates and any references that were not in French. References that only mentioned John Dewey in a cursory manner were excluded.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, entries that did not feature the specified query terms in their title or abstract were also discarded.

Following the identification and preliminary selection of articles deemed suitable for the literature review, a meticulous examination of the full texts was conducted. This stage aimed to filter out articles based on critical evaluations, resulting in a consolidated final corpus comprising 291 publications. The process undertaken during this procedure can be succinctly illustrated by the Prisma flowchart depicted in Figure 1. This diagram effectively outlines the progression of article selection, eligibility,

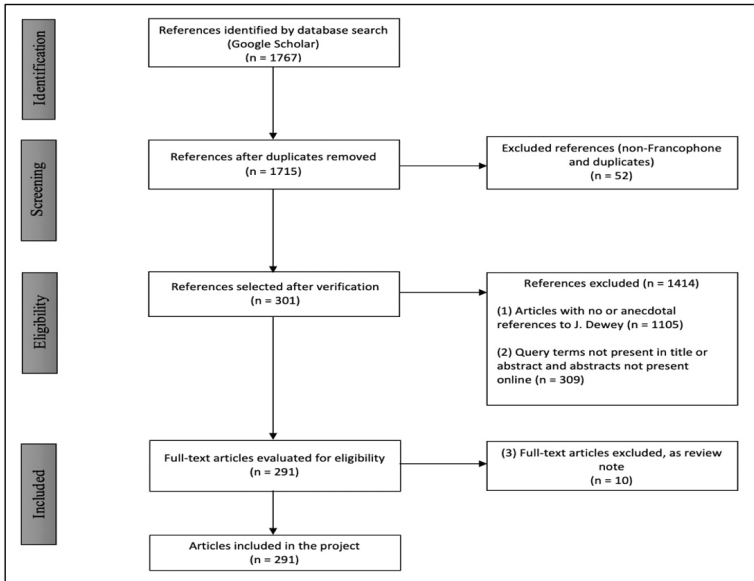


Figure 1. Prisma flowchart showing the steps of constitution of the corpus. Prisma (Standard for Conducting a Systematic Review of the Literature) is a tool for visualizing the research strategy adopted by the authors.

and inclusion into the textual corpus, guided by a series of inclusion criteria and exclusion factors.

Figure 2 showcases the distribution of publications over the last few decades, highlighting that the earliest identified publications date back to 1967, and that the data collection concluded with works from 2022. This visualization reveals a significant uptick in the volume of publications, transitioning from a period in which there were fewer than three publications per year, to a current era (beginning around 1992), which sees approximately twenty publications annually. This trend underscores the growing interest and engagement with the subject matter over time, marking a clear shift in the academic community’s focus, toward these concepts.

Comparing this growth in Deweyan inquiry publications with the systemic increase in the total volume of publications indexed by Google Scholar across all topics over the years proved insightful. To facilitate this comparison, the dotted line curves in Figure 2 represent the number of publications identified on Google Scholar that include “savoirs” (knowledge) or “enseignement” (teachings)” in their titles. These terms are utilized as benchmarks to gauge the overarching growth trends within Google Scholar. It is noted that the relative growth of these broader terms is significantly less pronounced than that of the corpus selected for this study.

Figure 3 shows the scholars who appeared as authors more than three times in the corpus, either as writers of a single-author work, or as a contributor to a multi-author publication. Of the 242 scholars represented in the corpus, thirteen authored three or more publications.

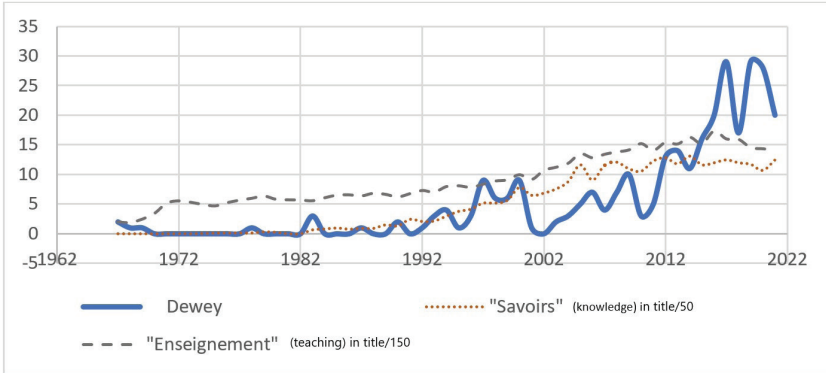


Figure 2. Number of publications presented per year in the final corpus of 291 documents (in solid blue thick line); The orange (small dotted lines) and grey (wide dotted lines) curves give the less marked temporal evolutions of publications containing “knowledge” and “teaching” in their titles. For the vertical scales to be comparable, the numbers of those containing “knowledge” were divided by 50 and “teaching” by 150.

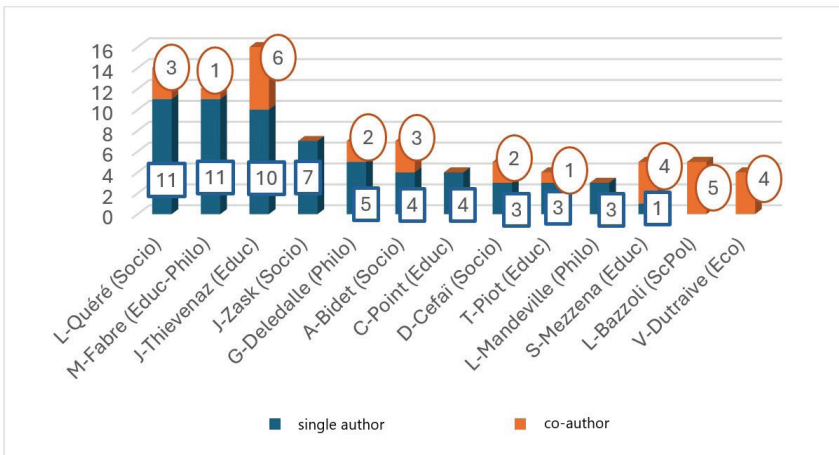


Figure 3. Number of references in the corpus per author (graph limited to the thirteen authors appearing strictly more than three times in the corpus).

## Second Step: The Search for Correlations Using a Lexical Analysis of the Corpus

Having completed the initial step, the next phase required examining the extent to which the themes addressed were correlated with specific periods and/or authors. To achieve this, it was necessary to categorize these themes into a limited number of “families” that could facilitate the identification of potential correlations. For this purpose, analysis software was employed to discern a few major publication families with lexically similar themes.<sup>45</sup> This effort utilized an automatic text segment classification algorithm developed by Max Reinert.<sup>46</sup> Originally included as part of the commercial Alceste® software, this algorithm is now accessible through the free software Iramuteq, created by Pierre Ratinaud and Sébastien Dejean,<sup>47</sup> and made available at no cost at <http://iramuteq.org>.

It is crucial to recognize that this software (Iramuteq), like TXM or similar platforms, serves as a complement to the analysis support tools offered by organization and coding support software, such as the versatile qualitative analysis tools NVivo or Dedoose. Specifically, Iramuteq stands out by implementing a well-known clustering algorithm that provides chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) and p-value calculations related to various words, classes, texts, and variable modalities. This functionality enables researchers to select the most significant tree structure to enhance their understanding of the corpus. In this regard, the application of such software significantly differs from the use of AI clustering systems: although AI systems do produce classifications, their optimization criteria are often opaque and not reproducible due to the inherent complexities of artificial neural network systems.

The algorithm was deployed on the corpus containing the titles of the 291 selected references.<sup>48</sup> Through a quantitative examination of the vocabulary utilized across these titles, the algorithm discerned clusters of words that frequently appeared together within the same titles while being less common in others. This capability enabled the algorithm to suggest how the title words might be divided into several “word classes,” with each class encapsulating words that are most characteristic of certain title families. Concurrently, the software generates a dual classification for the titles corresponding to these word classes. Thus, it becomes feasible to discuss lexicons—or classes of words—that are indicative of each title class and vice versa.

It is important to mention that a tuning parameter within the algorithm, referred to as NCT (number of terminal classes), enables the software to seek classifications into a greater or lesser number of classes, assuming the lexical distinctions within the corpus are pronounced enough to permit such differentiation. Furthermore, the NbMin parameter can be adjusted to set the minimum number of titles required for

a group to be considered a distinct class. This flexibility allows for the possibility to reveal, alongside the principal classes, small residual groups of titles, thereby shedding light on secondary phenomena within the study.

This dual classification—of both words and titles—facilitates an investigation into potential correlations between word classes (and thus the corresponding publication titles) and the modalities of qualitative variables (like the name of the main author) or those deemed qualitative (such as the year of publication). The Iramuteq software offers the functionality to compute chi-square distances between these classes and the modalities of qualitative variables, enabling the examination, testing, and comparison of correlation or anticorrelation relationships between these classes and modalities. This analytical process allows for the identification of titles most closely correlated with a thematic family, as well as associated authors or time periods, providing a multifaceted understanding of the dataset's dynamics.

This approach to gathering and analyzing textual data enables the creation of a classification system that delineates various scholarly modes of referencing the concept of inquiry, highlighting different currents or research perspectives that rely on this pivotal concept in John Dewey's philosophy of experience. Consequently, it facilitates the identification and delineation of distinct families of uses for the inquiry concept within the Francophone context of education and training, offering a nuanced understanding of its application across diverse scholarly works.

## IDENTIFYING AND MAPPING FAMILIES OF USES OF INQUIRY CONCEPT IN THE FRANCOPHONE SPACE: THE RESULTS OF LEXICAL ANALYSIS

### Gross Results

Parameterized to produce a classification into six main classes of words (and therefore titles), Reinert's algorithm produced from the corpus composed of the 291 titles of the publications the classification presented in Figure 4.

To help understand the titles mentioned in this figure, the titles of each class in the following section are based on the first three words they appear in and are translated into English. The identification of these classes, based on their titles' use of the concept of inquiry in education and training, therefore makes it possible to name, describe, and study the specificities of the research work conducted in each of them.

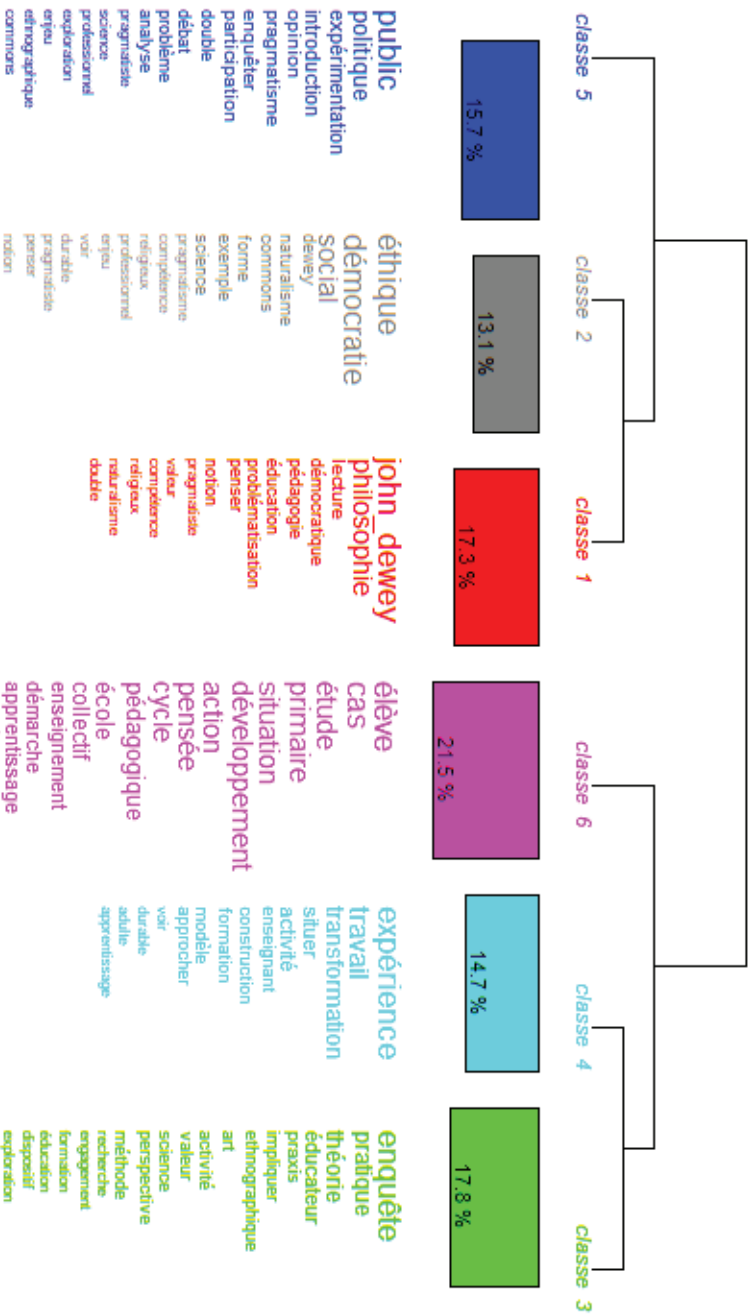


Figure 4. Dendrogram of an analysis of the Dewey corpus in 6 classes (as provided by the Iramuteg software, Reinert algorithm, NCT=13, NbMkn=25).

## Presentation, Description, and Analysis of the Six Main Classes Identified

For every class, the author whose publication titles were most strongly correlated with the class, along with the first two most correlated titles, will be highlighted. This method provides a substantiated and concise depiction of the distinctive features inherent to the identified families of use. Moreover, the title assigned to each class serves as a clarifying element, incorporating the primary words identified as significant through the statistical analysis of the corpus.

It's important to note that the class numbering depicted on the dendrogram is arbitrary, as it is contingent on the sequence of computational operations performed. The dendrogram's apex displays a tree structure illustrating the progressive fragmentation and branching of the entire corpus into distinct classes, thereby elucidating the spatial arrangement of the classes within the figure. For the purpose of presenting these groups, we opt to introduce the classes in descending order of size, and thus based on the quantity of titles classified within each class:

- Class 6: “Student, Case, Study” (“Élève, cas, étude” in purple on the dendrogram) is the largest, encompassing forty-one titles from the corpus. Highlighted by the two most correlated titles (Pépin’s 2017 article and Fabre and Orange’s 1997 article), this category is distinctly associated with the examination of learning within the educational sector.<sup>49</sup> Here, Dewey’s philosophy, particularly his inquiry concept, is predominantly invoked in discussions related to pedagogical and didactic considerations in the academic environment.
- Class 3: “Inquiry, Practice, Theory” (“Enquête, pratique, théorie” in light green on the dendrogram) comprises thirty-four titles. As illustrated by the most correlated titles (Mezzena and Stroumza’s 2012 and 2013 articles), the inquiry theory serves as a foundational framework for analyzing reflexivity, learning, and training processes within professional and social practices, including social work and managerial practices, emphasizing the praxeological aspect of research.<sup>50</sup>
- Class 1: “John Dewey, Philosophy, Reading” (“John Dewey, philosophie, lecture” in red on the dendrogram) includes thirty-three titles, encompassing works primarily of a philosophical nature as demonstrated by the most correlated titles (Nepton’s 2018 thesis and Tinland’s 2018 article).<sup>51</sup> This class focuses on discussions around the concept of inquiry’s origin or nature, contributions to the discipline, and reflections on pragmatism, and is thus less directly connected to educational and training fields.
- Class 5: “Public, Politics, Experimentation” (“Public, Politique, Expérimentation” in dark blue on the dendrogram) includes thirty titles, oriented toward

a sociological or sociopolitical approach. As shown by the most correlated titles (Ulmann and Delay’s 2021 article, and Bidet and Gayet-Viaud’s 2020 symposium contribution), contributions to education in this class comprise reflections on training-related public policies and notions of public engagement, participation, and citizenship.<sup>52</sup>

- Class 4: “Experience, Work, Transformation” (“Expérience, Travail, Transformation” in light blue) consists of twenty-eight titles, covering research that applies the inquiry concept to understand the interplay between work, activity, and the construction of experience in adults. The most correlated title (Thievenaz’s 2012 dissertation) indicates that this class’s research is rooted in adult education, with a strong empirical focus on care, vocational training, and social work.<sup>53</sup>
- Class 2: “Ethics, Democracy, Social” (“Éthique, Démocratie, Social” in grey on the dendrogram) includes twenty-five titles, featuring a more diverse collection of works. The most correlated titles (Point’s 2017 article and Bazzoli and Dutraive’s 2015 article) reveal a central focus on ethical dimensions, issues, or problems, addressing education and training from the perspective of democratic education and the resultant teaching practices.<sup>54</sup>

The lexicographical analysis performed in this study uncovers various research cultures within the humanities and social sciences where the concept of inquiry is utilized from distinct angles. Beyond the directions pursued by authors, a contribution to education and training issues (broadly defined) emerges both as empirical field research and as conceptualization aimed at transforming teaching practices. This encompasses reflections on pedagogical or praxeological advantages and the dissemination of methods grounded in democratic and participatory processes. Moreover, this analysis facilitates the elucidation of the relationships existing among these identified classes, offering a comprehensive view of how the concept of inquiry interconnects with broader educational and training paradigms.

## Relationships of Classes with Variable Modalities

After identifying the various classes and the scientific directions of the associated works, it is beneficial to analyze the relationships—whether they are dependencies, independencies, or antipathies—between these classes as illustrated in Figures 5, 6, and 7. It is important to note that while the classes are numbered, they do not appear in the same sequence as in Figure 4. This analysis enables the identification of significant periods of productivity for each class over the decades from 1983 to 2021, detailing the names of contributing authors and the years of publication for each period.

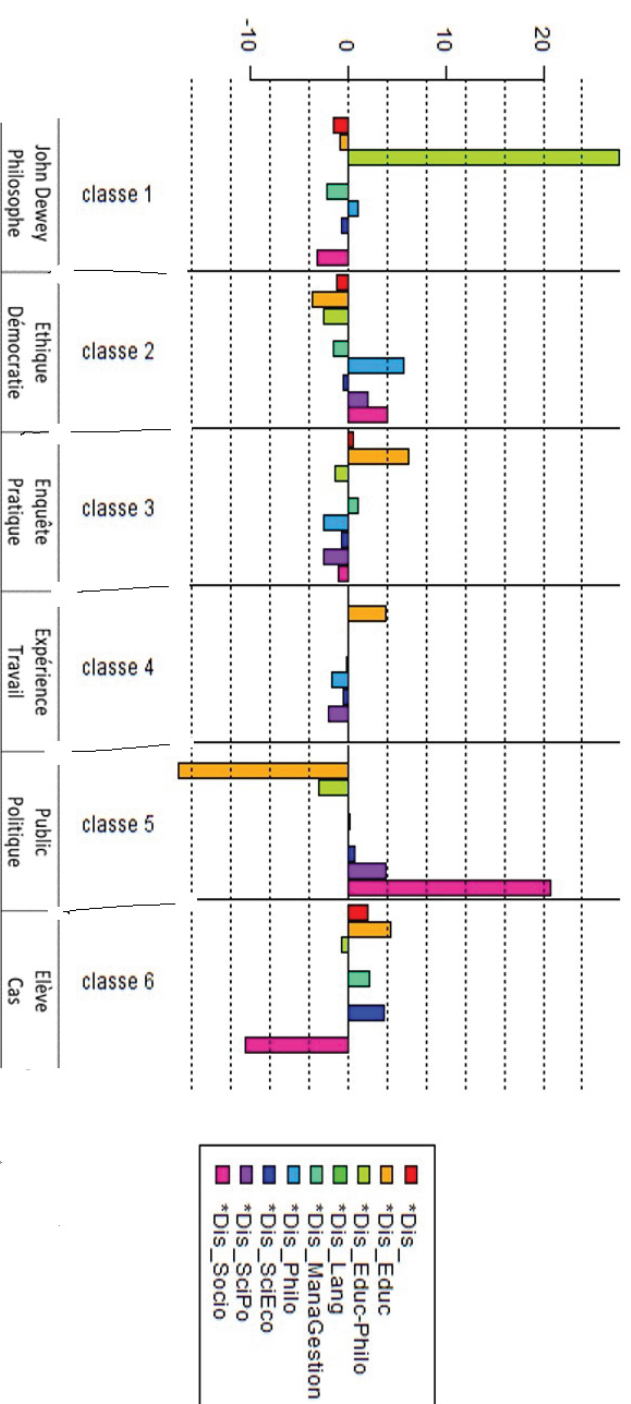


Figure 5. Correlations ( $\chi^2$  up) and anti-correlations ( $\chi^2$  down) between the classes and disciplines of origin of the authors of the titles composing them. The classes are in numerical order, rather than in the weighted order discussed above.

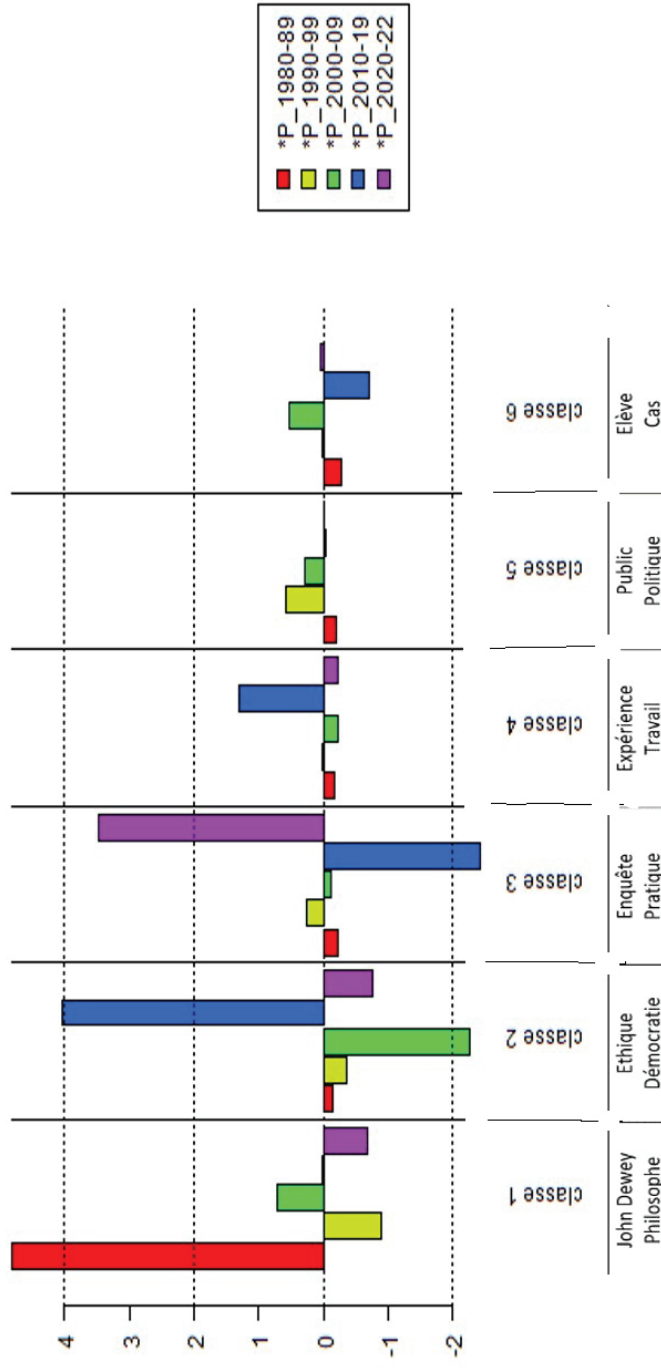


Figure 6. Correlations ( $\chi^2$  up) and anti-correlations ( $\chi^2$  down) between the classes and publication periods of the titles composing them. The classes are in numerical order, rather than in the weighted order discussed above.

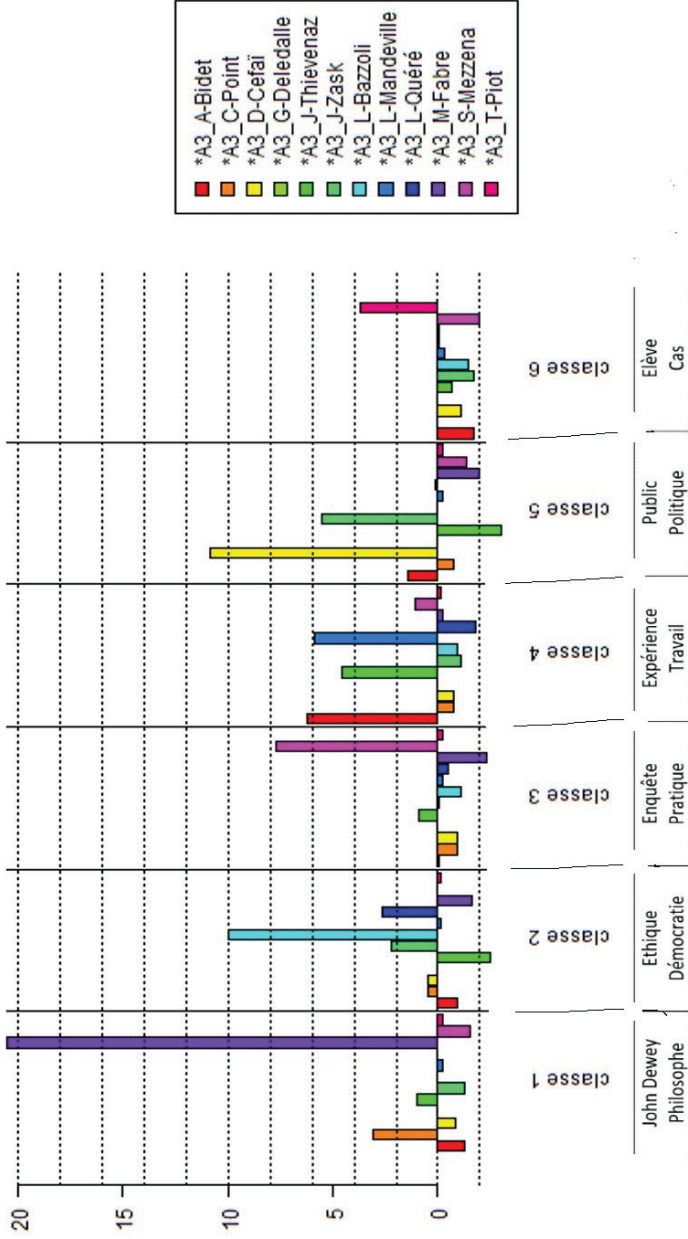


Figure 7. Correlations ( $\chi^2$  up) and anti-correlations ( $\chi^2$  down) between classes and authors identified more than 3 times (strictly) in the corpus. The classes are in the numbering order of the software.

An analysis of the three diagrams (Figures 5, 6, 7) facilitates the identification of the publication years for the works associated with each class and the most frequently cited authors for each class. More broadly, the analysis characterizes the periods of time during which the concept of inquiry was utilized across various research cultures and their disciplinary foundations.

- Class 6: “Student, Case, Study” engages the concept of inquiry within the realm of school learning and teaching. This class predominantly features work from educational science researchers (like Thierry Piot) and economists. The production volume across this class appears not to be linked to the period.
- Class 3: “Inquiry, Practice, Theory” employs the concept of inquiry in studies concerning training and reflexivity within professional contexts. Authors primarily hail from the discipline of educational sciences (such as Sylvie Mezzena), with most publications being very recent (predominantly during 2020–22).
- Class 1: “John Dewey, Philosophy, Reading” consists primarily of philosophical analyses of the concept of inquiry. Michel Fabre stands out as the author most emblematic of this approach. His works are among the earliest of those represented the corpus (1980–89) and are thus considered pioneering in the field of education and training.
- Class 5: “Public, Politics, Experimentation” gathers together titles integrating sociological or sociopolitical perspectives on training issues (such as legislative evolution and device questioning) and public participation. Notably, this class seems minimally engaged by education researchers. Distinguished authors include Daniel Céfaï and Joëlle Zask from sociology, with the production volume not significantly correlated to any specific period of time.
- Class 4: “Experience, Work, Transformation” applies the concept of inquiry to understand the interplay between work and what French researchers call work analysis or activity analysis within educational sciences. This class features authors from educational sciences or the sociology of work (Alexandra Bidet, Joris Thievenaz), with a recent peak of scholarly production falling between 2000 and 2019.
- Class 2: “Ethics, Democracy, Social” focuses on multidisciplinary ethical questions, with Laure Bazzoli being the most correlated author. The peak production period for this class is 2010–19.

## Small Residual Groupings

The six primary classes encompass 191 titles, accounting for 66 percent of the entire corpus. To delve into the remaining third, a more detailed analysis—achieved by adjusting the NbMin threshold for class validation—reveals 6 small residual groups

comprising 67 titles. Consequently, 33 titles remain unclassifiable (that is, completely dispersed), representing 11 percent of the total. These 6 small residual groups are outlined as follows:

- GR7 Residual Group: This group includes fifteen titles centered around “process, fashion, engineering.”
- GR8 Residual Group: This cluster comprises fourteen titles focusing on “uncertainty, context, support, management, managerial.”
- GR9 Residual Group: This category encompasses twenty titles related to “professional, construction, development.”
- GR10 Residual Group: This group contains eight titles on “creativity, epistemology.”
- GR11 Residual Group: This category includes six titles concerning learning and action related to the “body.”
- GR12 Residual Group: This cluster brings together four titles on “Pierce, Charles; and pragmatism.”

## CONCLUSION

Building on the observation of a revitalized interest in John Dewey’s concept of “inquiry” within French-language research, especially in scientific works pertaining to education and training, this article aims to differentiate the various scholarly applications of this term. To achieve this objective, a lexicographical analysis was performed using software designed for the collection and analysis of textual data, forming the basis of the study’s corpus.

The identification of distinct classes and the analysis of the most significant works within each have illuminated the specific ways in which the concept of inquiry is employed, varying by disciplinary foundation, research fields, and study orientations. Furthermore, examining significant periods of production has revealed patterns of gradual emergence, overlap, and fading of various categories of work, among other phenomena.

The lexicographical analysis undertaken thus provides a concise and comprehensible overview of the major trends that have emerged over time in the application of the concept of inquiry in relation to scientific, social, professional, and political issues within the Francophone context. It demonstrates that this concept was initially referenced predominantly in publications that critiqued education and training systems (emerging around the 1980s), grounded on the philosophical and political tenets espoused by John Dewey. This trend has gradually shifted toward other types

of scientific publications, where the concept of inquiry is employed in a more microanalytical manner, focusing on the comprehension of human activities and the learning processes occurring within and through activity. This evolution highlights a dynamic in the application of the concept of inquiry: while it originated from sociopolitical concerns, it has progressively moved toward addressing more localized and specific issues within each studied work and training context.

More broadly, this survey of contemporary uses of the concept of “inquiry” in the landscape of French-language scientific literature makes it possible to reveal scientific dynamics and “research cultures” dealing with educational and formative issues. This dynamic, observable in relation to the concept of inquiry, is interesting to study, because it reveals, beyond the uses of a single concept, a more general dynamic at work in education and training research in the French-speaking world where work of a *macro* (political) or *meso* (institutional) nature is gradually giving way to inquiries as close as possible to the actual conditions of what French researchers call conduct of the action. A possible extension of this study would be to investigate whether the classes of citations elaborated from a study of the French-speaking corpus could be found over the same period in the English-language literature referring to Dewey’s theory of inquiry.

This mapping is the first of its kind. In a context of increased reference to the concept of inquiry, it makes it possible, for the first time, to highlight research trends or cultures that until now have been invisible and incomprehensible because of disciplinary compartmentalization, the diversity of approaches, and the like. This research will help Francophone doctoral students situate their research in an academic field where references to Dewey are abundant, diverse, and eclectic. In Dewey’s terms, it would be possible to say that this survey on the use of inquiry makes it possible to clarify a French-speaking academic situation which for the moment remains obscure, full of contradictory tendencies, and not very intelligible.

The modeling of major trends shows that, beyond the authors’ disciplinary differentiations and the fields and research methodologies invoked, the theory of inquiry and the paradigm of experiential learning that it underlies has changed over the years. In the first works taken into account (from the early 1980s) authors called on this theory according to a philosophical trend in education that used the fundamental principles of the survey to shed light on the major educational issues of the time, such as the theme of problem-based learning in school education, the problem of the place of the learner at school, foundation and development of active methods, et cetera. However, with the 1990s and the emergence of new concerns relating to the development of alternating work-based learning and training, in-service teacher training, etc., gave rise to other modes of reference to the concept of inquiry. This approach is used in field studies that promote a micrological<sup>55</sup> and situated approach studying

professional gestures, work situations, teacher-student interactions, etc. The concept of inquiry at present is then connected no longer with major educational, democratic, and political concerns, but with empirical material derived from highly contextualized case studies. In doing so, they have renewed and recontextualized readings of Dewey's theory of inquiry and the modalities of use of the concept.

This quantification and mapping work also shows that in the French-speaking world, there is no single way of using the survey concept, but on the contrary a wide variety of approaches and uses. This is what gives this theory both its great topicality, but also makes it difficult to understand for those who discover it during their university careers, especially in pursuit of a master's or doctoral degree. This diversity of the use of inquiry reveals more fundamentally different epistemological positions, as this approach is sometimes called upon in a strict process of intelligibility (of practices, phenomena, situations) and sometimes according to a process of evaluation or transformation (of devices, curricula, organizations, regulations, et cetera).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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## RESOURCES

All the figures (in color version) as well as all the tables and files created for this publication are available (in spreadsheet format) online in open archives at <https://nakala.fr/10.34847/nkl.cb93b1fi>.

The authors used Chat GPT-4o in the OpenAI Team version for a final quality check of this text's writing.

## NOTES

1. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 104–5.
2. As evidenced by numerous international works, published very recently in English: Larsson et al., "Invisible Colleges in Research on Adult Learning," 73–97; Lowery and Jenlink, *The Handbook of Dewey's Educational Theory and Practice*; Rashid, Safada, and Batool, "Implementation of John Dewey's Pragmatic Philosophy at the University Level," 182–90;

Zhang and Garrison, *John Dewey and Chinese Education*; Dei, "Making Higher Education Count in Sub-Saharan Africa"; Naeem, Zafar, and Farooq, "Understanding Implementation of Pragmatism," 26–29; Yinkore and Mgbomo, "Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in the Nigerian Educational System," 19–27; Mayoral, "The Signposts of Inquiry."

3. During, "Présentation," 1011.
4. Thievenaz, "La théorie de l'enquête de John Dewey," 19–38.
5. Mainly in France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Quebec.
6. This technique uses clustering methods to explore the different types of vocabulary used in scientific articles on a given subject.
7. In reference to John Dewey's "theory of inquiry."
8. The corpus brings together not only recent scientific publications in the discipline of educational and training sciences, but also productions from other related disciplines (sociology, ethnography, philosophy) which, depending on their roots, question or echo the social issues of education and training.
9. Pierre Ratinaud and Sébastien Déjean, "Iramuteq: implémentation de la méthode Alceste dans un logiciel libre," *Modélisation Appliquée aux Sciences Humaines et Sociales* (2009).
10. Beginning early in the twentieth century, several of Dewey's works were translated into French. These include John Dewey, *L'école et l'enfant*, trans. L. S. Pidoux (Paris: Armand Colin, 1913); *How We Think*, trans. O. Decroly (Paris: Librairie Delagrave, 1925); *Schools of Tomorrow*, trans. R. Duthil (Paris: Armand Colin, 1931).
11. Legrand, *Pour une pédagogie de l'étonnement*; Best, *Pour une pédagogie de l'éveil*; Not, *Les pédagogies de la connaissance*.
12. See on this subject the analyses of Michel Fabre, including Fabre, *Situations-problèmes et savoir scolaire*; Fabre, "De la résolution de problème à la problématisation," 71–102; and Fabre, *Éducation et humanisme*. See also Albergo and Brassac, "Une approche praxéologique de la connaissance dans le domaine de la formation," 105–20; and Riondet and Renier, "Dewey et les dimensions sociales de l'expérience éducative."
13. As Gérard Deledalle notes in *La pédagogie de John Dewey*, "John Dewey (1859–1952) was active from 1882 until the end of his life. His work is immense. The critical and chronological edition of his writings, published by Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, comprises thirty-six volumes of 400 to 500 pages each, not counting the poems published in 1977 and the correspondence still largely unpublished" (Deledalle, *La pédagogie de John Dewey*, 47).
14. Alongside Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and George Herbert Mead.
15. This led him in particular from the 1920s to disseminate his thoughts on pedagogy not only in the United States, but also in the USSR, China, Japan, Mexico, etc. Additionally, Dewey chaired the commission of inquiry that cleared Trotsky in 1937 and engaged broadly in the democratic debates of his time. For more details on John Dewey's biography, see Ou Tsuin-Chen, *La doctrine pédagogique de John Dewey*, and Cometti, *La démocratie radicale*.
16. Deledalle, *L'idée d'expérience dans la philosophie de John Dewey*, 4.

17. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938; French trans. 1967), 72. For the sake of accuracy, if the French translation is mentioned, the choice is made throughout this article to include for each quotation from John Dewey the reference to the year of publication of the text in its original version (here 1938), then the year of translation of this text into French to which we refer (here 1967).

18. As Gérard Deledalle writes in *La philosophie américaine*, “Dewey was not only a brilliant teacher; he also innovated in all the disciplines he taught, when he did not open new paths to research in psychology and psychosociology, morality, logic, metaphysics, and aesthetics. For more than half a century, he was at the center of all philosophical discussions and debates of what is called the golden age of American philosophy” (Deledalle, *La philosophie américaine*, 48).

19. Zask, “Anthropologie de l’expérience,” 129–46.
20. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 104–5.
21. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 630.
22. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 185.
23. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 102.
24. Dewey, *Studies in Logical Theory*; Dewey, *How We Think*; Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic*; Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*.
25. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 107.
26. Russell, “Professor Dewey’s Essays in Experimental Logic.”
27. Dewey, *Le public et ses problèmes*; Dewey, *La quête de certitude*; Dewey, *Écrits politiques*.
28. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*; Thievenaz, “La théorie de l’enquête de John Dewey,” 19–38; Thievenaz, *Enquêter et apprendre au travail*; Thievenaz, “Les déclencheurs de l’‘enquête,’” 139–48; Las Vergnas, “Réflexivité des malades et dialogues entre phénoménologies pragmatiques et épistémologies académiques” and English translation “Patients’ Participation in Health Research”; Las Vergnas, Bury, and Jeunesse, “L’analyse quantitative de corpus textuels”; Olry and Froissart-Monet, “Valuation et corps de l’enquête”; Paggetti, “Agir et apprendre par le corps,” 57–69; Paggetti, “Sur le terrain de la psychomotricité,” 145–53; Keddah Chair, “Sur le terrain de l’inattendu,” 163–69; Alberio, “Les sciences de l’éducation au XXI<sup>e</sup>”; Thievenaz, “Les situations d’apprentissages réciproques”; Thievenaz, “Rencontrer et susciter l’inattendu”; Thievenaz, “L’intérêt de la notion d’‘enquête’”; Thievenaz, “Le rôle de l’étonnement.”
29. Mayen, “John Dewey, l’éducation et la reconstruction continue de l’expérience,” 9–22; Mayen, “Les limites de l’expérience,” 293–319; Mayen and Pin, “Conditions et processus de l’engagement en VAE,” 13–29.
30. Dechamboux and Mottier Lopez, “L’enquête de l’enseignant-évaluateur et du chercheur,” 173–95; Cauvin and Récopé, “Complexité et dynamique de l’activité de médiation de l’enseignant”; Saillot, *(S’)ajuster au cœur de l’activité d’enseignement*.
31. Thievenaz and Thélin-Metello, “La part d’autrui dans la conduite de l’enquête,” 93–110.

32. Muller and Lussi Borer, "Initier une enquête collaborative orientée activité," 58–80; Muller and Lussi Borer, "Analyse de l'activité, environnements de vidéo-formation et développement professionnel des enseignants," 95–116; Piot, "La démarche d'enquête de Dewey."

33. Albero, "Les sciences de l'éducation," 15–27; Albero, "La théorie de l'enquête," 39–56; Las Vergnas, "Des freins à une coopération fructueuse entre professionnels de la recherche et acteurs de la société civile," 25–29.

34. Thievenaz and Fabre, "La Théorie de l'enquête de John Dewey," 129–78.

35. Dessberg, "Éducation, démocratie, révision et pragmatisme"; Meirieu, *Pédagogie*; Meirieu, *Ce que l'école peut encore pour la démocratie*; Frelat-Kahn, *Pragmatisme et éducation*; Renault, "Dewey, Hook et Mao," 138–57; Riondet, "La réception de Dewey chez les enseignants militants français dans les années 1950," 49–64; Renier, "Éducation, science et société dans la dernière philosophie de John Dewey (1929–1939)"; Fabre, "De la résolution de problème à la problématisation," 71–102; Fabre, *Situations-problèmes et savoir scolaire*; Fabre, *Éducation et humanisme*; Alix, *L'éducation progressiste aux États-Unis*; Pudal, "Les réceptions du pragmatisme en France"; Schneider, "John Dewey in France," 69–82; Point, "John Dewey: propositions pour une reconstruction démocratique de l'université"; Charbonnier, *Que peut la philosophie ?*; Charbonnier, *L'érotisme des problèmes*; Sensevy, "Pourquoi Dewey?," 9–30; Go, "La question de la reconstruction chez Dewey," 49–64.

36. Saussez and Allal, "Réfléchir sur sa pratique," 97–124.

37. Mayen, "John Dewey, l'éducation et la reconstruction continue de l'expérience," 9–22; Mayen, "Les limites de l'expérience," 293–319; Bourgeois, "Expérience et apprentissage," 13–38; Fabre and Thievenaz, "L'enquête: un concept heuristique," 95–104; Muller and Lussi Borer, "Initier une enquête collaborative orientée activité," 58–80; Muller and Lussi Borer, "Analyse de l'activité, environnements de vidéo-formation et développement professionnel des enseignants," 95–116; Renier and Guillaumin, "Comment nous cherchons"; Piot, "La démarche d'enquête de Dewey."

38. Thievenaz and Fabre, "La Théorie de l'enquête de John Dewey," 129–78.

39. Thievenaz, Fabre, and Las Vergnas, *Digest Version of John Dewey's Theory of Inquiry*.

40. Las Vergnas, Bury, and Jeunesse, "L'analyse quantitative de corpus textuels."

41. The choice of Google Scholar is justified by the fact that this database is today the most complete multidisciplinary and multilingual source in terms of scientific publications. See Gusenbauer, "Google Scholar to Overshadow Them All?" The main limitation of this method is that if author abstracts are not available, they are replaced with an excerpt from the full text that has been harvested by Google Scholar.

42. Harzing, *The Publish or Perish Book*.

43. The queries were made during 2022, and the choice was made to stop the statistics at the year 2022 to avoid distortions of the corpus due to variations in the time of reporting of records in Google Scholar.

44. The choice was made not to take into account references that did not use *The Theory of*

*Inquiry* by John Dewey.

45. Las Vergnas, Jeunesse, and Bury, "L'analyse quantitative de corpus textuels."
46. Reinert, "Un logiciel d'analyse lexicale," 471–84.
47. Pierre Ratinaud and Sébastien Déjean, "IRaMuTeQ: implémentation de la méthode ALCESTE d'analyse de texte dans un logiciel libre," *Modélisation Appliquée aux Sciences Humaines et Sociales* (2009).
48. Google Scholar's retrieval of bibliographic records does not guarantee access to the complete text of the abstracts. Moreover, experience shows that the comparative study of the corpus of titles (or titles + keywords, if the publishers of the search field concerned recognize a shared thesaurus) is the most relevant method to identify classes of publications corresponding to the themes of a field of research. See Las Vergnas, Bury, and Jeunesse, "L'analyse quantitative de corpus textuels."
49. Pépin, "Le projet entrepreneurial"; Fabre and Orange, "Construction des problèmes."
50. Mezzena and Stroumza. "Des enquêtes pratiques à la connaissance"; Mezzena et al., "De la réflexivité du sujet."
51. Nepton, "La notion de sens dans la philosophie de l'éducation de John Dewey"; Tinland, "L'influence de Dewey sur la philosophie."
52. Ulmann and Delay, "L'expérimentation d'une politique publique de formation professionnelle"; Bidet and Gayet-Viaud, "Remettre la démocratie sur ses pieds."
53. Thievenaz, Joris. "Construction de l'expérience."
54. Point, "Faire de la démocratie une éthique et une pédagogie"; Bazzoli and Dutraive, "Sciences sociales, économie et démocratie."
55. Thievenaz, "Pour une approche micrologique de l'expérience en formation d'adultes," 233–42.

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