

Comparison of a Freinet-inspired school with standard primary provision in a working class neighbourhood in northern France

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The French press has recently grasped the issue of "success at school for all children", with various daily papers and magazines featuring on their front page a school at Mons en Baroeul in northern France. This school has now been working for 14 years on the basis of a Freinet-inspired pedagogy, from kindergarten to fifth class (age 3 to 10). Higher than expected results in national tests, the almost total disappearance of violence, and unusual but nevertheless effective ways of teaching and learning at the school partially explain this interest from the national media.

But it can also be understood by virtue of the fact that the teachers of this school, all of whom are voluntary, have asked our research team to evaluate the effects of their pedagogy on the learning process of their pupils. This research has been conducted over a lengthy period (more than 5 years) and has led us to a deep understanding of pedagogical and behavioural aspects of the school and the outcomes.

In this short presentation, I shall try to get to the core of what has taken place. The practices of teachers and pupils are determined by specific arrangements which in turn have led to new practices. Our research allowed us to identify the *principles* that underpin their practices.

Let's start with an example, that of **cooperative dictation**. Dictation is one activity used in teaching French at primary level, and most frequently consists of dictating a text from a "literary" work. During this evaluated exercise, the task of the pupils is to write down the text which is read aloud by the teacher, making as few "mistakes" as possible and without looking at their neighbour's work. In the school which was the subject of our research, the dictated text had been written by one of the pupils. Other pupils were able to ask questions about anything they found difficult (eg. flour or flower?) but the other pupils were not allowed to answer by spelling out the word directly (like f-l-o-w-e-r). They had to answer the question with an explanation that removed the ambiguity (it smells nice; it has not been ground etc.)

Here are some of the principles exemplified in this process :

- The right to make mistakes, to question, to learn through trial and error.
- Cooperation between pupils.
- Continuity of teaching methods: such a process is used in all classes of the school, starting from the 1st grade.
- Importance given to pupils' own work: pupils are "responsible" for their work.

An example of a different process is that of « mathematical research » which underpins a large part of mathematical teaching, from 1st grade. Pupils are asked to work individually on a question they have constructed themselves : eg. calculating a sum with the days of the week, drawing a sun (with a specified number of rays), drawing a right angle without a set

square, multiplying the largest possible number. The pupil then presents his or her research and answers any challenges set by the class. The completed research is displayed and can be looked at by the other pupils.

This process, which was analysed over a long period of time, was found by researchers to be structured according to the following principles:

- First of all, **questioning of pupils** as the basis of activities.
- The different but **shared roles of pupils**: one pupil takes on the role of the teacher while his or her peers become critical peers.
- **Pupils becoming authors of their work** (not just imitators or subordinates) but not owners: the pupil is the author of his or her research (or piece of work) but not a jealous owner. He or she must share with the others the questioning or process followed.

We also identified the following:

- the principle of **coherence**: whoever the teacher and the pupil are, their relations are governed by the same set of rules. The sanction for a mis-thrown ball, a fight, or an insult on the school playground is the same for everybody.
- the principle of the **central place of work at the heart of the school**. The well-being of the students is absolutely not the main concern of the organisation of classes and practices, but a *consequence*. This is very important and needs to be stressed. The class is organised in a way that produces good discipline and its processes are legitimate through making the work possible, enjoyable and interesting.
- the principle of **autonomy** is also at the root of the teaching methods. It is with regard to this principle that the validity of the activities is measured. By way of example: the biggest possible sanction is the deprivation of autonomy. If a pupil doesn't behave well, he or she will not be allowed to move freely around in the classroom to get equipment etc.

Concerning the teachers, their practices in the classroom appear to conform to the principle of "**just distance**". It seemed that the teachers of that school quite often occupy a position that is somewhat in the background, compared to teachers in other schools. The study of spoken exchanges shows that the teachers may remain silent for considerable periods, intervening only when they think it necessary asking for a more suitable rephrasing or to issue a reminder, or on a point of discipline. Likewise, the study of "geographical" positions in the class shows that these teachers sometimes occupy - on purpose - non dominant places (in the middle of a circle of pupils, for example).

Two further principles need to be mentioned :

the principle of parental involvement. In this working class neighbourhood it is not the norm for parents to participate in school life. Many do not get involved at all. At this school however practical arrangements have been introduced: personal invitations, appointments to meet staff, inviting parents into the classroom etc.

Finally - it seems to the researchers that **learning democracy** with its many challenges is at the very heart of the school's practices.

For this project we asked the research team not to focus on studying theoretical texts, or on the political and ideological references that underpin the work of these teachers. On the contrary, they were asked to concentrate on the arrangements that inform the school's practices in order to understand the conscious and less conscious principles on which their work is based.

Indeed, on the one hand it seems to us that the practices, or rather the system of practices, cannot be transposed right away. Firstly because those systems are dynamic, always moving, and secondly because they are dependent on the people involved and on the contexts in which and with which they are conceived. In other words, they have a history.

On the other hand, deciding how the set or system of principles can be communicated is a complex task. In the end, it relies on teachers able to create arrangements that obey the principles which have been outlined.

Background information:

We describe the school neighborhood as working class (but without work) in the sense that all indicators of social inequalities are significantly higher than the average for the surrounding area.

- The unemployment rate (19.8%) is one of the highest in the area and in France as a whole (and is still growing)
- The rate of social housing is much higher (37%) than in the surrounding region (Region Nord : 20%) and France (14.5%)
- The number of single-parent families (20%) is also higher than that of the region (Nord), of the area and of France as a whole.
- The number of children belonging to families without employment (18%) shows the same difference (Nord 15.9%) (France 10.9%).

Our research and some methodological elements :

The research is mainly based on comparison with other schools but also on comparisons over a period of time within the studied school. The other schools which were investigated are very diverse:

Some are very similar from a sociological point of view : schools in the same neighborhood of Mons en Baroeul, of the town of Lille.

Some are similar from a sociological and geographical point of view.

Some are more distant : schools from Parisian suburbs, two schools in the centre of Lille, but also rural schools in Flanders.

Multiple data sets¹ were studied. We also observed numerous sessions in those schools (nursery and primary schools), photographed the walls of many schools, conducted more than 300 interviews. Questionnaires on violence and other topics were distributed to parents and children at many schools across the whole region.

¹ 11 researchers have worked on the project over 5 years. Under their guidance, post-graduate and other students also conducted many observations.

We mainly studied subject-specific learning but also looked at the change of atmosphere within the school. Below is a non exhaustive list of areas that have been explored:

- Mastery of certain aspects (story writing, scientific descriptions, construction plans in maths, etc.) ;
- Questioning of pupils in science, maths, history...
- Appropriation of concepts (eg symmetry in maths)
- Mastery of argumentation (in discussions but also in areas of study) ;
- Perception of violence and its description
- Dealing with « troubled children ».

For example, the stories produced by children in the Freinet school are significantly longer than the written work collected at other schools. Pupils at that school write a lot and in different genres. Another example : pupils in that school don't rub out the geometric shapes they attempted to draw, but modify or transform them if they seem wrong. Their view of the world from a mathematical point of view is not comparable with that of pupils in other schools. In science, their questioning is both immediate and elaborate.

The "outstanding" results at the school should not conceal what is maybe one of the most interesting factors: over the years, the school has constantly progressed in national tests, and also in its ability to mobilise different types of intelligence as well as to improve behaviour. But it is still not among the "best" in the area in terms of raw results, indicating that they have not fully overcome the social handicap. As one of the teachers explained to us, inequalities are contained. The school has not become more inequitable even though this has been the tendency in other schools in similar circumstances. The research shows that the Freinet approach is more effective on a range of measures than standard pedagogy (among schools in similar social conditions), but doesn't completely overcome the social deprivation.