

Think outside the box!

*The following are some thoughts inspired by this conference.
Our objective in publishing them is only philosophical and informative.*

*I invite you to read them entirely
to understand how this affects us all,
hoping you can read well enough, otherwise
you can always learn, like me, by reading...*

*Feel free to share your comments and experiences, complementary or contradictory,
by writing to alliasbl@gmail.com*

Should education be compulsory?

What motivated me to organize this symposium was the observation that about 15 to 20% of individuals who have spent more than 12 years in school, in developed countries such as France and Germany, become functional illiterates. That is, they barely understand the meaning of basic texts and are therefore often victims of social exclusion. According to the results of the 2016 PIRLS study, only 4% of French 10-year-olds are able to give meaning to their reading, compared with 7% in 2001¹. A report from the European Commission even considers that 40% of German adults qualify as functional illiterates².

Having been able to observe children learning to read naturally, voluntarily but not effortlessly, at their own pace, in their own way and becoming effective readers, these figures seem completely irrational to me.

Indeed, how can we not learn to read in societies where writing is omnipresent and where we have superb libraries and books in abundance?

I then seriously questioned if functional illiteracy was due to poor educational treatment in schools. Regarding this question, here is what a senior UNESCO official answered me:

« I, myself, am absolutely of the opinion that school, in its present form, contributes to promoting illiteracy, and there are countless examples of this. » Anonymous

How is this possible with everything we know in education sciences?

Jean-Pierre Lepri reminds us that confusion between "reading" and "deciphering" is common. Rather than learning to decipher words into sounds, it would be better to go directly from a graphic form to a meaning. Moreover, deaf readers read without oralizing and, in an environment where the rhythm and the pleasure is respected, one can even learn to read before speaking³.

¹ <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid21049/pirls-2016-evaluation-internationale-des-eleves-de-cm1-en-comprehension-de-l-ecrit-evolution-des-performances-sur-quinze-ans.html>

² « L'analphabétisme fonctionnel des adultes dans les pays riches de l'ouest »
<https://ec.europa.eu/epale/en/node/40675> Electronic PLatform for Adult Learning in Europe

³ Rachel Cohen « Reading in early Childhood » <https://ncela.ed.gov/files/rcd/BE023771/3soderbergh.pdf>

Jean-Pierre Lepri concluded this conference by saying:

« **School teaches not to read** ».

It is true that in the 19th century, the French Jules Ferry did not hide reserving the control of writing to the dominant elite while promoting the secular, compulsory and free public school:

« *Those who are strong on mechanisms (phonics) understand nothing about what they read, while ours will understand (understanding with their eyes)* »⁴.

During his career as an inspector, Jean-Pierre Lepri advocated learning to read independently of speaking by publishing a text in November 1987. Although this text had little effect on teachers' practices, it earned him an immediate visit from the Inspector General from Paris, who asked him to put these ideas on hold ; his only "inspection" in 29 years ⁵ !

In the 21st century, however, the teaching of deciphering (sounding out words) is still in force, and sometimes even strongly recommended as an essential method, but is it really ideologically neutral ⁶ ?

Indeed, according to some studies⁷, no matter what the students' social background, the ideovisual approach is less effective than the phonics approach. However, it is important to remember that these observations are based solely on academic standards. For example, reading skills are compared in grade three of primary school, and young people are compared to those upon whom reading instruction has been imposed.

From this point of view, **these studies are incomplete because they ignore the non-coercive learning of reading, learning without imposition, method, or rhythm**, and do not necessarily take into account the cultural contribution outside school.

Alan Thomas' testimony at the symposium speaks volumes on this subject. Research on informal learning outside the school environment is very rare. This explains, in part, why we would also have to ask ourselves who finances scientific studies and for what purposes.

In her presentation, **Harriet Pattison** invited us to rethink learning to read as an imposition or a liberation. She cited a family with 12 children out of school, each having learned to read in their own way, and relates the very striking case of little *Heather*⁸, labelled with all kinds of dys(functioning) and condemned in advance by the school system. However, Heather ends up blossoming and reading novels, having been able to develop outside school norms and expectations.

In his primary school *of the third kind*, all **Bernard Collot's** students learned to read without teaching and without a curriculum. Each individual implemented his own natural and biological brain processes.

Peter Hartkamp tells us very clearly that we should only teach an individual if he asks us to. And for Peter Hartkamp, if, despite an exemplary school system, 50% of Finnish pupils are not motivated, this is probably due to the imposition of a study plan by the State.

⁴ Jean Pierre Lepri « Lire se livre » p. 42 & 48 (Ed. Hêtre Myriadis)

⁵ Ibid, p. 78

⁶ <http://education3.canalblog.com/archives/2018/05/14/36402604.html>

⁷ Sandrine Garcia « A l'école des dyslexiques » p. 241-242 (Ed. La Découverte)

⁸ <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/5051/1/Pattison14PhD.pdf>

Another look at the DYS

In more than 30 years of practice, Bernard Collot has barely noticed dyslexic students in his classes and given the prevalence of this particular brain function (over 5%), it is unthinkable that there were no dyslexics in this case.

The famous pedagogue Célestin Freinet even says « Dyslexia does not exist at all in schools working according to our techniques and the children who are affected cure themselves »⁹.

And what about all the illustrious people from the past who overcame their "dys" disorders? How did they succeed and could they have reached their potential if they had been *assisted*¹⁰ ? Are there studies on this subject ? I haven't found any yet.

Learning disabilities also do not seem to be a problem in free schools like Sudbury Valley¹¹ or Peter Hartkamp's democratic school where you can learn to read - or not - when you want, whatever your age. But, as reading is very useful, all these young people end up reading in search of knowledge and meaning¹².

The neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene¹³ was able to demonstrate through brain images that the brains of illiterate people remain plastic enough to learn to read as adults.

As for dyslexics¹⁴, Dehaene thinks that the ultimate cause is not visual but phonological. However, he explains that those who read only Chinese characters behave like illiterate people, without manipulating phonemes - that is, without using the sound elements of spoken language, without oralisation, and therefore quite different from what can be observed cerebrally in literate people (most of whom have probably been forced to learn by deciphering).

Why then assume that the ultimate cause of dyslexia is phonological and completely ignore the fact that one can read without oralizing?

I had the chance to hear about the beautiful experience of Cynthia Lésignac, a dyslexic woman:

She learned to read around 5-6 years old. The global method with very little phonics used in her school suited her well. She would later use syllabic methods for learning writing and foreign languages. For a long time, she was unable to spell a word and was completely terrible in dictation, for which she was deprived of recess, but she managed to learn to write without help by mental representations (the verbs « to be » and « to have » are men, the verb « to eat » is a woman, the direct object is the buddy of the verb, the figures are also characters and the calculations their history).

At 20 years old she learned that she is dyslexic, a beautiful label that does not solve the problem. She can't hear when she reads and sees only pictures. If she reads aloud, it is not always in accordance with what is written, but the meaning is there. She imagines in relation to what she knows, her culture, her travels. If a person speaks in the story, she hears her voice. Her daughter, who is "hyperlexic", reads at about 5 years before her first year of primary school. The syllabic method used in her school enabled her to learn to write. She's constantly reading books, even in the shower. Bilingual, she doesn't decipher anything and goes from one language to another through image!

⁹ Célestin Freinet « La méthode naturelle d'apprentissage de la lecture » p.182 (Ed. Delachaux et Niestlé)

¹⁰ <http://dyslexiahelp.umich.edu/success-stories/all>

<http://www.bachelorsdegreeonline.com/blog/2011/25-famous-authors-with-learning-disabilities/>

¹¹ Peter Gray <http://www.journalofplay.org/sites/www.journalofplay.org/files/pdf-articles/5-3-interview-play-as-preparation.pdf>

¹² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201002/children-teach-themselves-read>

¹³ Stanislas Dehaene « Les neurones de la lecture » <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=256LjpfTYg>

¹⁴ Ibid., if your *child* confuses letters like d and b listen to minute 40 using the automatic subtitles to translate.

Eight years later, two identical twins arrived from the small kindergarten section, quickly catalogued as lazy. Because they loved music, they sang the letters in kindergarten and thus missed out on conventional academic learning.

At 8, they still couldn't read or write and never opened a book except to look at the pictures. One was in his bubble, the other performing very well in class. The latter had identified the form of the exercises: the order of the texts that had to be put in their place was always the same, he was only copying, but the brothers were only interested in the writing material for the drawing. Then there were manifestations of school phobia and other ailments, the deterioration of their self confidence prevented any new acquisition, so that they were deschooled. After 6 months out of school, at 9 years old, they knew how to read as readers giving meaning. They had been free to read what they liked, especially at the beginning of comic books for teenagers without texts.

The mother concludes: teachers need diagnoses, while sometimes it would just take a little kindness in class to help decode an exercise's instructions. She herself, as a French and history/geography teacher, did not hesitate to prepare her classes by offering several methods to her students. She is convinced that a child is "dyslexic" because it is called "dys" but that in reality "dysfunctions" are created by the school for lack of individualized pedagogies and benevolent listening.

Finally, strong from this experience, Cynthia Lésignac changed professions to help "dys" children but by unconventional methods... she became a sophrologist, school accompanist and teaches French as a foreign language. She says that it still makes no sense in our time to conceive that a child or an adult could "dys-function".

The international forum on learning disabilities¹⁵ organized in 2016 by Her Royal Highness the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg has the merit of making these differences and the suffering they cause in the school environment better known. It is well said that "dys" is a problem in relation to a standard. Indeed, the normative expectations of the school curriculum lead to a medicalization or even an overmedicalization of individuals with all the side effects that this entails, but **is it really necessary to stick a "dys" label on a person?**

Sociologists Simone Garcia¹⁶ and Stanislas Morel¹⁷ have long taken an interest in this question. When schools became popular, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were less equipped to engage in reading in relation to normative school expectations, as their oral language was less developed. Being considered as "dys" avoids being stigmatized as lazy or stupid, a lesser evil in a way.

Isn't this a fine example of collective normopathy perfectly illustrating the presentation of psychologist Franziska Klinkigt at this conference or are we simply trapped in a perverse system under the guise of social equality?

But what is reading ?

Jean-Pierre Lepri analyses "reading" as follows:

Read 1: I read letter to letter

Read 2: I see, I understand

Read 3: I recognize words, I give meaning, reading is reading what cannot be read

Read 4: Thought is transposed into life.

A good reader lets himself be carried by meaning, he does not see what he reads.

¹⁵ www.dysfocus.lu

¹⁶ Sandrine Garcia « A l'école des dyslexiques - Naturaliser ou combattre l'échec scolaire? » (Ed. La Découverte)

¹⁷ Stanislas Morel « La médicalisation de l'échec scolaire » (Ed. La Dispute)

Moreover, proofreaders from publishing houses often proofread books backwards, word by word. Expert readers anticipate, read with their eyes, know the interactions and the repetition of occurrences.

For Dominique Vachelard¹⁸, an experienced pedagogue, teacher and member of the French Association for Reading (AFP)¹⁹, you need to be familiar with about 80% of non-visual information to understand what you read. Consequently, **the main work to learn to read is the work on general culture**. Learning grammar is not essential and can be offered later.

Should we read ?

During the final debate of this symposium, we asked ourselves if it was really so important to read. It is, of course, for everyone to know what is right for him at any given time. However it has been recalled that writing has always been the weapon of the powerful. But who are the powerful?

As the Swiss sociologist and UN representative Jean Ziegler explains so well, « ... the leaders of the 500 most powerful private transcontinental societies are beyond any state, trade union or parliamentary control. They practice a single strategy: that of maximizing profits in the shortest time and often at any human cost. These cosmocrats, these masters of the world, hold more financial, political and ideological power than any emperor, pope or king has ever had in the history of peoples²⁰ ».

He quotes his deceased friend, Pierre Bourdieu, who said « Obscurantism has returned, but this time we are dealing with people who claim reason » and who do not hesitate to spread the most pious lies²¹.

We are thus witnessing in many areas an absolute alienation of the collective consciousness.

We continue to view energy and mining resources in our economic equations as unlimited²² by omitting human and ecological costs²³. We foolishly believe that, if we cancel third world debt, the global financial system will collapse. We often ignore the existence of vulture funds and also the real causes of world hunger²⁴. Too often, without our knowledge, or not, we are accomplices in crimes against humanity worthy of a Nuremberg trial and we accept that 1% of the people on the planet possess wealth greater than those of the remaining 99%.

¹⁸ Pierre Badiou et Dominique Vachelard « Ecole, violence et domination – Notre école nous apprend-elle vraiment à lire ? » (Ed. Du Cygne)

https://www.lamontagne.fr/brioude/education/2016/05/30/dominique-vachelard-a-presente-son-dernier-ouvrage-a-la-clef_11935409.html

¹⁹ <http://www.lecture.org>

²⁰ Jean Ziegler « Le capitalisme expliqué à ma petite-fille (en espérant qu'elle en verra la fin) » p.68 (Ed. Seuil)

²¹ Ibid., p.92

²² Jean-Marc Jancovici « Dormez tranquilles jusqu'en 2100 et autres malentendus sur le climat et l'énergie » (Ed. Odile Jacob)

²³ Guillaume Pitron « La guerre des métaux rares : la face cachée de la transition énergétique et numérique » (Ed. Broché)

²⁴ Jean Ziegler « La faim dans le monde expliquée à mon fils » (Ed. Seuil)

Capitalism, as it is allowed to exist in the non-respect of fundamental rights and ethics, makes us (over)live while others die. The ideology of competition on which it is based, ideology even biologically questionable, also dominates the educational world and diverts it from its true missions.

Alan Thomas made it clear that school and educational practices are based on dogmas with no real scientific basis supported by an absolute majority of actors (he speaks of 98%).

Mélissa Plavis and **Bernadette Nozarian** spoke at length about the powerful, and for them, deschooling goes far beyond learning, it is a way of relearning to live differently, outside the school and dominant ideology, by taking care of our relations with others and with the environment. It is a way out of domination, not from the point of view of the dominated but from that of the dominant.

Bertrand Stern has made us reflect at greater length on adult domination and fundamental rights. His philosophical approach has proved effective in practice in helping families in a country (Germany) where people rejecting the obligation to attend school are still too often systematically interned or even criminalised, despite constitutional law.

Fundamental rights are safeguards against abuses; they are a bulwark against fear and ignorance. It is essential to defend them and demand they be respected in order to protect ourselves from the current obscurantism which hinders or even prevents civilization's progress.

In this sense, the individual's freedom to choose how to learn, how and by whom one could be taught, is a fundamental right essential to the progress of civilization in the pure respect of fundamental freedoms, whether in an educational institution or elsewhere, in all dignity.

We spoke at length at this symposium about how fragile and repressed this freedom of education is, even in our so-called democratic societies.

The testimony of Peter Hartkamp and his wife, on the functioning of their democratic school, also made us think about what democratic decision-making could and should be, which bears little resemblance to most parliamentary debates...

It is urgent to disalienate our conscience to bring down the cannibal order of the world.

For Jean Ziegler, « one does not absorb speech *read* in the same way as speech *heard*. Speech read requires the consciousness of one who actively receives it, who has made the effort to seek it, has taken the time to interpret it, and has decided to retain it in his memory ».

And he adds, « **No intellectual medium is more powerful than the book as a bulwark against one of the most formidable poisons of civilizational deconstruction: the ephemeral**²⁵ ».

*My greatest realizations will have been through the written word.
Also, I consider reading a weapon of massive construction which must
absolutely be made truly accessible to the greatest number of people.*

Katy Zago

²⁵ Jean Ziegler « Les murs les plus puissants tombent par leurs fissures » p.75-76 (Ed. De l'aube)