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(UN)SUPERVISED AUTONOMY

Getting pupils to “take responsibility” for their learning

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Introduction

The category of autonomy has become increasingly important in the field of education in recent decades. Today, pupils are commonly expected to be active, to take responsibility for their learning activity through individualized school work formats (Durler, 2015; Lahire, 2005; Périer, 2014). An argument often put forward is that promoting autonomy would make it possible both to address the heterogeneity of pupils and to optimize individual learning, to help pupils with the greatest difficulties while supporting the “potential” and motivation of each one, in line with the new expectations of “inclusive education” (Cerna et al., 2021).

However, the forms of autonomy generated within these educational settings are opaque and their relation to school inequality rather ambiguous. While individualized arrangements are presented as a solution to adapt teaching to the specific needs of the individual learner, it is unclear whether and how these can contribute to enhancing equity and equal opportunities or, on the contrary, rather reinforce school inequalities. In particular, it remains to be seen what practices are put in place in the daily life of the classrooms to promote pupils’ autonomy: How do teachers manage to get pupils to work autonomously? What obstacles do they encounter? What are the pupils’ practices?

The present contribution relies on a research project that furthers previous work on classroom practices aimed at fostering pupil autonomy in primary schools (Durler, 2015) and in private Montessori schools (Leroy et al., 2021). We will analyse the observations made during a didactical project carried out with two classes at the end of compulsory secondary education in mathematics in a large rural school. Our field is part of a larger ethnographic research project on self-directed learning in lower secondary schools in Switzerland.¹ Here,

we discuss insights from our study site located in Romandie (see Chapter 7 for an analysis of the “German-speaking” field site).

By bringing together classes from two different levels, the pedagogical project aims to improve the autonomy of pupils by changing the usual organization of teaching. These ambitions raise a series of questions: What practices have teachers put in place to foster pupil autonomy? How do pupils work in this context? In particular, how differently do the teachers support performing pupils and how do low-performing pupils deal with the demands of autonomy? Through the presentation of our observation data, we will show that what is central to the approach adopted by the teachers is the desire to make the pupils responsible for their own work. In order to break away from an authoritarian relationship of vertical transmission of knowledge and imposition of discipline, a certain amount of freedom is granted to them, at different levels (spatial, temporal, in work methods, etc.). This led us to examine in the first part the extent to which didactic prescriptions promoting approaches that develop pupil autonomy are linked to the issue of school inequalities. In the second part, we present the practices of the teachers observed in our field research, in order to understand how and to what end pupil autonomy is promoted. In the third part, we tackle the constraints that hamper the initial ambitions of teachers. We conclude the chapter with a reflection on the risk of increasing inequalities linked to this desire to introduce practices aimed at pupil autonomy.

Autonomy-oriented learning arrangements as *dispositifs*

Autonomy in the school context is the subject of numerous studies in the educational sciences and didactics, which question the means to be used to promote pupil autonomy, often with a prescriptive aim. From this perspective, it may concern for example the question of learning materials that promote autonomy, in particular the impact of the use of new technologies (Amadiou & Tricot, 2014), didactic choices, and the organization of pupils’ work (Liquète & Maury, 2007) or the effects of collaboration among pupils (Connac, 2016). The reasons why this prescription is so important lie at the crossroads of various influences. On the one hand, pupil autonomy is closely linked to a vision of the individual that emphasizes freedom of choice, self-government, and even personal fulfilment, a legacy of certain principles advocated by the *new education movement* (*le mouvement d’“éducation nouvelle”*). It is also part of a context of reduced public spending, a search for greater efficiency and lower-cost “solutions”, and a transformation of what is expected from pupils that is more or less linked to the world of employment (Leroy, 2022). On the didactic level, the promotion of autonomy often goes hand in hand with the promotion of socio-constructivist approaches based on a critique of transmissive teaching (Garcia, 2013), which views teachers as the authority and pupils as passive receivers. Instead, these approaches emphasize project-based teaching and the

active child. They now constitute the ordinary practices of public schools, whether in primary school or in secondary school (Barrère, 2013) or in the choice of learning materials (textbooks, children's literature, for example) (Bonnéry, 2015). According to this socio-constructivist perspective, each pupil should necessarily discover by themselves, thanks to the mediation of the group and the teacher, the steps leading to the elaboration of knowledge that is not transmitted by the teacher. These pedagogies are supposed to give "meaning to learning" (Kerroubi & Rochex, 2004) and have often been favoured with regard to low-performing pupils. At the same time, the individualization of the treatment of pupils' difficulties is on the increase, with the demand to differentiate, to set up personalized programmes, etc., contributing to the spread of the idea that pupils have a personal responsibility (Garcia, 2021) in relation to their academic performance.

From a sociological perspective, there have been warnings that this autonomy-oriented pedagogy increases educational inequalities (Anyon, 1997/1980; Bernstein, 2007/1975; Bonnéry, 2011; Dannepond, 1979; Demailly, 1990; Isambert-Jamati et Grosppiron, 2007/1984; Joigneaux, 2009; Lahire, 2005; Perrenoud, 1984; Plaisance, 1986). The criticism is that the transfer of autonomy to the pupils in particular is not appropriate for pupils with learning difficulties. Authors argue that these pedagogical developments would tend to raise the overall level of requirements, without transmitting to the pupils the prerequisites enabling them to acquire school knowledge in the situations that arise. In this regard, Basil Bernstein (2007) makes a useful distinction between "visible" and "invisible" pedagogies: "visible pedagogy" corresponds to the traditional conception of teaching, in which the learning content is defined in advance, broken down, and sequenced, and the assessments are explicit. In the "invisible" model, on the other hand, the tasks are global, the sequencing is loose, and the pupil is barely aware of the aims of the tasks. Insofar as autonomy pedagogies tend to approach the invisible model, they contain the risk of increasing the difficulties of pupils from working-class backgrounds due to the emergence of socio-cognitive misunderstandings (Bautier & Rayou, 2009) for pupils who are less familiar with school expectations.

In order to understand the issues, particularly in terms of educational inequalities, linked to pedagogies that promote pupil autonomy, we adopt a perspective that is attentive to the processes of socialization (Darmon, 2006; Lahire, 1998, 2005), of the "social fabrication of individuals" (Lahire, 2013), and we endeavour to describe the "social frameworks" in which autonomy is constructed and exercised (Geay, 2011). In particular, this perspective makes it possible to reflect on the subjects that are produced within a context that emphasizes increased leeway granted to pupils (freedom of choice, empowerment, the right to express one's opinion, etc.).

To understand the – sometimes contradictory – relationships between pedagogical intentions and the conditions making it possible for pupils to appropriate these aims and to mobilize or construct the resources necessary for their

appropriation, we use the French theoretical concept of “*dispositif*” (Bonnéry, 2009, 2011; Durler, 2015; Foucault, 1975; Lahire, 2005). Talking about “*dispositif*” allows one to understand how the principles favoured in the use of techniques, objects, and practices aimed at making pupils gain knowledge, outline the features of the ideal pupil and define the qualities that they must demonstrate, the relationship to knowledge that they must adopt, and the power relations in which they must be involved (Lahire, 2005).

Investigating autonomy in lower secondary school

To understand how pupil autonomy can be concretely put forward in pedagogical practices, we focus on an autonomy-based project to teach mathematics to two 11th-grade classes, with pupils aged around 15. The teaching project gathered pupils with different levels in mathematics from these two classes for joint lessons in the same room over a three-month period. Our observations started a few months before the implementation of the “pedagogical experiment”. First, we made observations of the different classes, talked with the two teachers involved, Fabrice and Muriel,² and participated in a field trip where the two classes were brought together and mixed so that the teachers, as they told us, could better observe the behaviour of the pupils, understand the affinities between them and prepare the constitution of the groups for the next teaching sequence. Second, we closely followed the project, observing the activities in the classroom during a total of 38 hours. Usually, we both stayed in the classroom, shadowing (McDonald, 2005) the work of the two teachers and focusing on the interactions of a few pupils. In addition to these classroom observations, we also held informal discussions with teachers and pupils before and after the observed periods and shared more festive moments (outings, Christmas activities, meals with teachers in restaurants). We also administered a questionnaire and held focus groups with pupils in each class.

In this secondary school, pupils are separated into two groups by level (“standard” and “strong”) in mathematics, French, German, English, and natural sciences, and they are therefore in separate classes for these subjects. Prior to the project, Fabrice was in charge of a “standard” math class of 18 pupils (11 girls and 7 boys), while Muriel was responsible for a “strong” level class of 16 pupils with an equal gender distribution. For the duration of the project, the two classes were held in a room larger than the usual classrooms, the school’s conference room, and the teachers were both present during the teaching periods.

The educational project lasted from November 2019 to January 2020. The *dispositif* is characterized by three working methods, each lasting approximately four weeks. These phases of the pedagogical experiment were defined beforehand by the two teachers, who thus wished to set up distinct arrangements involving increasing autonomy of the pupils in their work. The first

method (in November) consisted in having the pupils work in workshops and in working groups. The teachers formed fixed groups of five to six pupils, usually mixing the two performance levels. They were given instructions on how to work through a chapter of geometry using several sequences of theory and exercises to be completed together. Each group had to choose a sequence to start with (in no predetermined order) but had to complete all of them within four weeks. The second method (in December) was based on a “work plan”, which pupils had to follow. They had to hand in the results of their work individually and regularly to the teachers in order to get feedback on their progress. At the same time, the teachers kept a record of the progress of the pupils’ work, reproduced in a table projected on a screen that was constantly visible to all pupils and on a computer accessible to pupils. It is designed as a double-entry table, where each row corresponds to a pupil and each column to an exercise. In each cell, a number indicates how many corrections and feedbacks the teacher has sent to the pupil, with a system of colours for the cell to indicate whether the exercise has been completed correctly (green), whether there are minor corrections to be made (orange) or more important ones (red).

The last method (in January) used is the “flipped classroom”: many resources are made available to pupils (mainly video instruction but also manuals, mobile phone applications, etc.) who must work according to “objectives” predefined by the teacher. Pupils are therefore given a list of objectives. They are then free to choose how to achieve them: they are free to choose the exercises to be carried out and the materials to be used, the manner of working (alone or in groups), and the time and location for working (in class or at home).

Each of the sequences corresponds to a subject in the 11th-grade mathematics programme: geometry, equations, functions. For each of them, the teachers were available to answer the pupils’ questions, but did not give a “frontal lesson”. The teachers offered “workshops” on request and after registration of the pupils to “lift the blocks” the pupils may have experienced at certain points. These three methods explicitly aimed at promoting the autonomy of the pupils, as explained here by the teachers:

Convinced that each pupil should be able to progress at his or her own pace, the pupils will have the opportunity to discover working methods that empower and develop the autonomy of each one.

(Extract from the letter sent to the parents in August 2019)³

More specifically, one main objective was made clear by the teachers: to make pupils responsible for their learning, giving them the freedom to take ownership of the learning content and letting them decide by themselves when to take the tests. We will now look at how these initial intentions translate into the daily practice of teachers and pupils.

The way of making pupils responsible for their learning

Giving pupils choices

Based on strong criticism of the negative effects of the traditional school system, the two teachers intended to enhance pupils' choices and room for manoeuvre in learning. At the beginning, in early November, teachers told pupils that they were free to use the space as they saw fit. They could sit in the corridors, in the conference room, work in the position of their choice, etc.

A group asks to set up their table in the corridor. Muriel answers, "There is no problem". The pupils take a table and chairs and set up outside the classroom.

(November 8, 2019 – field notes HD)

Choice even becomes imperative, as Fabrice says, "You don't have much choice, you're going to have to choose. You're going to have to get interested" (September 17, 2019 – field notes HD). In the teacher's words, a distinction is made between "mobilization", which would be compulsory, and "motivation": "We don't ask you to be motivated, it's not compulsory. But you have to mobilize yourself and maybe motivation will follow" (September 17, 2019 – field notes HD). The attitude required towards work is therefore that of voluntary "mobilization", which should lead to satisfaction for the pupils, potentially a source of motivation for learning. "Mobilization" here is therefore similar to "effort", but is never designated as such. It is primarily words that refer to freedom that are used (such as "choice", "will") as an impetus towards responsibility: "You are responsible for doing as you wish" (September 17, 2019 – field notes HD).

Fabrice: "(...) you are totally free, you come here, you can start work straight away. (...) We will help you if you need it, we are here at your disposal, and everything is allowed. Really, everything is allowed, as long as you work, that's it. Don't ask us if you may go to the toilet, don't ask us if you may stand up".

(November 25, 2019 – field notes CG)

This freedom given to pupils extends to the work itself. The pupils have to "manage" it themselves, according to the objectives given to them, as Fabrice announces, "It is you who will choose what you are going to do. We're not going to tell you anymore" (January 6, 2020 – field notes HD). In this perspective, pupils have the possibility to decide when to take the assessment test:

Fabrice: “You decide when you take the written test over a three-week period. Do you agree? You can choose that. Great! Well, good job. Have fun”.

(November 12, 2019 – field notes HD)

The teacher’s last remark (“Have fun”) refers to an important aspect of the pedagogical approach: the pupils have to enjoy their work.

Fabrice: “I hope you will have fun taking control of your learning and working as you like. In general, you often have a teacher who imposes a lot of things upon you and that doesn’t necessarily suit you. So, my goodness, it may be destabilizing, but I seriously hope that you will have pleasure in doing a bit of that”.

(January 6, 2020 – field notes HD)

During our visits, indeed, a relaxed atmosphere prevailed, in which pupils chatted, joked, shared food, stood up, moved around. As the following exchange finally shows, the teachers intended to establish a general climate of trust, and the pupils had to feel that they had the teachers’ trust on their side:

While the pupils continue their test, Fabrice and Muriel talk. Muriel says that the problem with sitting so close is that they can cheat. Fabrice tells her that it’s okay, “if they do it in a smart way”. “It’s important to show that we trust them, it’s part of the process”. Muriel says to me, laughing: “Fabrice is cool, isn’t he?”

(December 6, 2019 – field notes HD)

Trusting pupils and leaving the choice to them can be understood as techniques of “concernement” (Lahire, 2005) aiming at the fact that the pupils can no longer say that the tasks do not interest them since they have chosen them themselves. Having “willingly” chosen their activity, the pupils are strongly encouraged to pursue it to the end. The “pedagogical trap” (ibid., p. 330) then closes on them: they cannot fail to complete what they have “chosen” to do; they are deemed “responsible” for their choice, and they must therefore take responsibility for it.

In the teachers’ vision, the goal of autonomous learning for pupils goes hand in hand with the conception that the teacher must take a back seat. In an email sent to us in April 2019, the teachers presented their project as follows:

We wish to experiment with three sequences between the end of October and the end of January 2020 with the main objective of developing “autonomous learning” for our pupils. (...) In this process, the objective

is that the pupils acquire the ability to construct their own knowledge, with the teacher no longer considered as the holder of knowledge but the resource person who provides the framework and tools enabling the pupils to find their best potential.

(Email of April 5, 2019, sent by Fabrice)

Teachers are no longer the “holders of knowledge”, but they become “resource persons”. This appears through the idea that it is not the teacher who asks for a task to be done, but the pupils who have to respond to instructions, written by a “designer” who could be someone other than the teacher. Fabrice said, “To work well, you’ll have to respect the instructions. If you are told to work alone, it’s because the person who conceptualized the thing thinks it’s right” (September 17, 2019 – field notes HD). Teachers regularly remind pupils that they have to manage their time and make time trade-offs in relation to learning objectives that they have to identify:

Fabrice: “The important thing is the acquisition of objectives (...) But don’t count on us to give you homework. It’s your responsibility, OK? But that doesn’t mean there is no homework”

(November 5, 2019 – field notes HD)

Teachers emphasize the idea to their pupils that they have to fend for themselves, arguing that they will not be assisted by a teacher forever: “You won’t always have a teacher around” (November 5, 2019 – field notes HD). The withdrawal of teachers can be perceived physically, with pupils being completely left alone at times (in the corridors or in the hall), causing one pupil to jokingly say, “Isn’t there a teacher here?” (December 10, 2019 – field notes CG).

While freedom of choice is emphasized as a means of empowering pupils, it is inextricably linked to helping them work without teachers, as Fabrice explains it to us, “Giving them autonomy is one thing, but it’s also about them having a range of possibilities to get into the work without us” (November 8, 2019 – field notes HD). In this spirit, pupils are regularly asked to seek support from each other, to help one another, as Muriel also tells them, “We ask you to learn to collaborate” (November 8, 2019 – field notes HD). The withdrawal of the teacher is thus accompanied by a clear encouragement to collaboration:

Fabrice: “To work, you really do as you like. You have Mrs Muriel and myself as a resource, but get used to being resources among yourselves”.

(November 25, 2019 – field notes CG)

Pupils are encouraged to seek out teachers “wisely”, i.e., not to be “assisted”, but to get help in planning work. Pupils should therefore understand that they should not remain alone when they stall but should take the initiative to ask

for support from others. Asking for support from others is understood as a way of making progress in their independent work. In fact, this “withdrawal” can be seen in interactions in which the teachers place the responsibility for the choice of the working method on the pupil:

Chloé (Strong level⁴) asks Fabrice about the exercises: “Does that mean we have to do them all?” He replies by telling her what he would do, but that it is a method that suits him, not necessarily her. “If I were you, I would proceed in order until I feel confident. You can do anything, make it your own”.

(January 7, 2020 –field notes HD)

By positioning themselves as a “resource person”, the teachers’ objective is also to provide individualized support, offering more to those with greater needs. Fabrice points out that “you can say what you like about this type of teaching, but what is certain is that the teacher has time to devote to those who need it most” (November 4, 2019 – field notes CG). Later, pupils are reminded of this by Fabrice: “you have two teachers available who have nothing else to do but to help you. So really, we don’t have anything else to do but to take an interest in you” (January 6, 2020 – field notes HD).

Confronting pupils

Our observations show that the *dispositif* requires a significant investment on the part of the teachers: through practices of close observation of their pupils, a significant amount of time spent preparing and correcting the pupils’ work but also various forms of verbal interaction aimed at encouraging and motivating them. Indeed, autonomy conceived as shifting the responsibility for learning onto the pupil does not only have a didactical aim. Fabrice, in particular, states that he wants to participate in the transformation of the individual:

That’s typical, it’s very confronting for the pupil, but in my opinion, in terms of learning, it is a game-changer. It doesn’t change the fact that they have to learn maths, but it changes their attitude.

(December 3, 2019 – field notes HD)

The expression “confrontation”, understood as a moment that can be unpleasant, “destabilizing” for the pupil, but with a potential for transformation, is regularly used by Fabrice during our exchanges, but also during the interactions he has with the pupils. Sometimes, this “confrontation” is expressed in a terse tone, clearly indicating that the pupils are in charge, that they are no longer going to be “cocooned”: “It’s up to you to take notes that are necessary to know where you stand. That’s your business, you’re the ones who are going to have to be responsible for it” (September 17, 2019 – field notes

HD). The pupil's accountability can also be achieved through forms of "provocation" by the teacher:

Fabrice: "But you, what did you want to do? Ask yourself the right questions. You still haven't understood that. Don't forget that you're in a group. You have *to rely on it*".

Maeva (Standard level): "Nobody relies on the group. But we're not doing the same exercises".

Fabrice: "OK, carry on like that, ignoring what I've told you, it's your problem" (November 5, 2019 –field notes HD)

To "confront" pupils means to make them "aware" that they "are in charge". This is not only done through speeches but also through the use of teaching materials. For example, the tables summarizing the status of the pupils' work plan constitute a confrontation technique: the progress of the pupil's work, made public, is intended to raise awareness. Thus, the aim is to encourage pupils to seek help and not have learning constraints imposed upon them. In other words, making pupils autonomous does not mean abandoning them to their difficulties, it means encouraging them to take the initiative in the process of acquiring knowledge. It should be noted that this project was not intended to be implemented to the detriment of the most difficult pupils; on the contrary, the teachers regularly reaffirmed their concern to see these pupils make progress and showed a marked interest in them throughout the project, whether through close observation of these pupils or, more generally, through the adoption of close physical postures, the teacher being most of the time kneeling next to the pupil. However, if the teachers aim at individualizing teaching to the benefit of those most in difficulty, our observations indicate that the teachers devoted more time to the pupils who ask for it and that the "strong" pupils are those who make the most demands on the teachers (November 2019 – field notes CG). As a matter of fact, pupils tend to spend long periods of time raising their hands to call the teachers and complained about wasting time:

Charles (Standard level) tells Loïc (Strong level): "You've been calling the teacher for five years. You don't know why you call her anymore".

(November 12, 2019 –field notes HD)

Thus, while the didactical arrangement implemented aims to make pupils responsible for their learning, the teachers' stated ambition is, more generally, to have an influence on the pupils themselves, on their attitude, and their state of mind. If the pupil's freedom seems to be central, it is accompanied by

techniques designed to ensure that the pupil is mobilized in the expected direction. The teacher's action consists either of "confronting" the pupils by close observation of the pupils' work, mobilizing speeches, or the use of teaching aids, making individual progress visible to all. In addition, the teachers mention the need to regulate the pupils when they are having difficulties in their learning or in their attitudes towards work. As Fabrice himself summarizes it, "There is the autonomy that they don't have and we have to help them. There are some who are confrontational there are some who need to be regulated, because they are totally deviating" (December 3, 2019 – field notes HD).

Thwarted autonomy

Despite all the efforts of the teachers to make pupils responsible, the latter adopted practices that deviated from the teachers' expectations. In response, the teachers started to resort to forms of constraint that were not included in the design of the project. Thus, although their aim was to grant free choice to the pupils, during the course of the project, we observed a rather immediate recourse to external constraints, particularly in response to what they consider to be "disturbing" behaviour:

I move to the back of the room. In the meantime, the ambient noise has increased. In the classroom, there is laughter, someone knocks over a chair. (...) Fabrice speaks up, "Today, (...) I also see people who let themselves be taken in by the game in the wrong way. That means that there are some who really get caught up in ... there are games, there are possibilities, there are openings, I can do what I want to some extent, but I'm not mature enough to assume that, and I do something else, and I start playing or doing something else. What bothers me the most is that it's detrimental to those who have become very mature in their work and that you don't provide an atmosphere that is conducive to becoming really better. That bothers me a lot".

(November 22, 2019 – field notes, CG)

Indeed, we observed the teachers wavering between freedom or tolerance for even "inappropriate" use of the provided freedom on the one hand and forms of constraint or pressure to counter what might appear to be school deviance on the other hand, particularly when pupils do not hand in their work on time.

Fabrice and Muriel decide to split up a group of boys, because they are making too much noise. Fabrice: "we have to give them a little less freedom. They are not mature enough for that kind of freedom".

(January 14, 2020 – field notes HD)

This shift from freedom to constraint manifested itself in the use of space. In the beginning, teachers told pupils that they were free to use the space as they saw fit. They could sit in the corridors, in the conference room, work in the position of their choice, etc. But the constraint became tighter as the weeks went by, so much so that for the second half of the project, pupils were no longer allowed to leave the classroom.

The hardening of constraints was also obvious concerning temporal freedoms. The aim of letting pupils work at their own pace was revised by the teachers as the project progressed, as they felt compelled to follow the curriculum. Due to this time pressure, the teachers demanded from those pupils who had not finished their work on time to come to school at 7.30 am, before the start of classes. During these 45 minutes of restraint, the pupils had to complete the work requested in silence. Furthermore, even if there was officially no homework, teachers implicitly expected pupils to work at home to fulfil the time schedule. The system itself is designed in such a way that the pupils have all the materials (boards, video clips) online at their disposal to work at home.

On the part of the pupils, there were forms of resistance to the accountability process that was put in place. This resistance can manifest itself in the daily life of the pupils by an absence of work or lack of discipline. This resistance can also be expressed openly, as shown by the exchange between the teacher, Fabrice, and the pupils when he informs them of the teaching methods that will be used between November and January:

Fabrice: “How do you imagine this. Will it go well? I’m waiting to hear your opinion on how you’re dealing with all this”. (Silence from the audience for a few seconds)

Charles (Standard level): “I prefer when the work is given to me because it’s hard to concentrate with my mates around”.

Nell (Standard level): “I think it’s more efficient to give us a list of exercises. Now we’ll have to read the content of all the workshops, it’ll take time”. (...)

Eva (Standard level): “I’m already not very motivated by maths, I prefer having things imposed on me. I don’t know, I feel a bit bad about it”.

Fabrice: “I’m very sensitive to that. I’ll be there to help you. However, you are to choose what’s good for you. I’m not abandoning you, I’m not leaving”.

Imany (Standard level): “I prefer it when someone imposes things on us. It requires much more responsibility than before”.

Fabrice: “It’s destabilizing”. (...)

At 1:45 pm the bell rings, and the pupils go out into the corridor. We talk to Fabrice. He says he is

happy that the pupils have expressed themselves, even if it is not positive (September 17, 2019 – field notes HD).

It is interesting to note that the freedom given to the pupils extends to being able to express that they do not like the working method. However, these discussions leave the observer with a paradoxical impression: it seems that if pupils are allowed to express themselves, they may also internalize the idea that expressing one's opinion does not serve much purpose since the working method is imposed upon them.

In sum, our observations of teachers' and pupils' practices show contradictions inherent to the implementation of a "compulsory autonomy" (Durler, 2015) in the school context. On the one hand, the teachers, even though they do not wish to position themselves in an authoritarian manner vis-à-vis the pupils, are forced to adopt constraining practices to make the pupils work, which runs counter to the project of empowering the pupils in which they should take the initiative in their work. The pupils, on the other hand, do not easily accept the accountability they are subjected to. Through resistance practices, they force teachers to place constraints on them and tell them what to do. In other words, they demand the possibility to not be autonomous, motivated, and responsible for their work. In this way, the pupils' empowerment project is thwarted insofar as the pupils adopt practices that deviated from the teachers' expectations, forcing them to resort to forms of constraint that were not included in the project.

Recourse to parents: An "imperative"

It is noteworthy that the observed pedagogical *dispositif* seems to include recourse to parents in the case of difficulties, as one of the teachers clearly expressed it in an email he sent us:

This type of confronting method for the pupils allows us to create this kind of situation and precisely to allow certain pupils to progress and to become more independent and mature when working, but I admit that without the help of the parents the challenge often remains daunting.

(Extract from an email sent to us by Fabrice, January 12, 2020)

Parents are perceived as a necessary resource, as Fabrice tells us: "in fact there is a lot [to do] outside the classroom" (January 14, 2020 – field notes HD) but also as a potential source of conflict, if they do not adhere to the project, if they question the practices or if they refuse to collaborate with the teachers. In this logic, there are therefore two types of parents who pose a problem: parents who are seen as "critical" (who challenge and monitor the teachers) and parents who are seen as "uninvested" (who insist that teachers should

assume total responsibility for schoolwork, who feel that they should not do the work for them). In the following extract, Fabrice anticipates a possible refusal of the parents to support him, thus leaving him with a “problem”, the impossibility of relying upon them.

Fabrice: [...] And soon, I’m sure I’ll get calls from parents, or I’ll call the parents, and two or three of them will say, “deal with it”, you know? We’ll have this problem.

(December 3, 2019 –field notes HD)

The pedagogical project aimed at encouraging the autonomy of pupils is thus accompanied by work with parents in order to get them to adhere to it and initiate coordination, as Muriel explains to us here:

I communicate a lot with Sean’s parents [Strong level] [...] as I felt he was not ready at all for the test, I wrote to the parents (conversation in appendix). They phoned me twice this week to coordinate on a common discussion with Sean who seems to have seriously started to work on his test preparation and shows us a clean and complete work. So, his parents seem to have finally sided with us and by working together with them, we are starting to see positive results.

(Extract from an email sent to us by Muriel, January 10, 2020)

In all cases, a great deal of work was done to convince parents of the merits of the approach and encourage them to continue the work done in class at home, whether through individual discussions or at teacher-parent meetings. This trend is reflected in the orientation of parents’ practices by teachers in order to make them “pedagogical auxiliaries” (Thin, 2009). Parents should therefore follow up on their children’s homework and take up the discussion on motivation to work from the same perspective as teachers. Teachers thus express a conception according to which the school cannot be its own recourse in the event of pupils’ difficulties. This assumed outsourcing of part of the pedagogical work produces inequalities among families who are differently equipped to enter into this collaboration (Delay, 2013; Périer, 2019) and take on this work but also has repercussions on the work of teachers since it implies a more or less informal form of education of parents by teachers (Conus & Nunez Moscoso, 2015; Deshayes et al., 2019; Durler, 2015; Scalabrini & Ogay, 2014; Van Zanten, 2012).

Conclusion

Through the presentation of empirical material from field observations, we have seen how teachers concretely go about leading pupils into autonomous

work. We have highlighted the initial attentions, the socialization goals expressed, the preferred didactic paths: freedom of choice, mixing pupils with unequal levels of performance, ensuring the withdrawal of teachers and encouraging collaboration between pupils, the emphasis on individual responsibility and mobilization through forms of “confrontation”. In particular, we found that far beyond learning mathematics, the *dispositif* aims to change individual learning behaviour by making pupils responsible for their work. In fact, the *dispositif* does not work as expected: not all pupils accept the compulsory autonomy; some enjoy the freedoms without mobilizing themselves, and the low-performing pupils in particular demand more authoritarian teacher guidance. The teachers also eventually thwart the proclaimed pupil autonomy in order to achieve the given learning goals after all.

We argue that if these contradictions appear, it is because this empowerment requires pupils to possess resources, linked to forms of relationships to time, to school work, etc., that are not directly constructed in the classroom. The path of “confrontation” favoured by the teachers we observed clearly shows that the autonomy expected of pupils relates to an injunction: in the event of a problem, the aim is for the pupil to “remobilize” (mobilize resources that are conceived as personal), rather than to reflect on the construction, in class, of these resources.

At the same time, there is an almost systematic appeal to parents in case of difficulties. These observations are in line with the tendency documented elsewhere (Durler, 2015, 2019) to shift more of the responsibility for educational work onto the pupil and his parents. Generally speaking, the propensity to shift part of the work to the “client” (consumer, user, beneficiary, patient, etc.) is a cross-cutting development in the organization of work (Dujarier, 2008; Tiffon, 2013), largely discussed in the commercial world and which has yet received little comment in the world of education (Losego & Durler, 2019).

In summary, seen as the result of individual mobilization, through forms of “confrontation” aimed at bringing pupils to “take responsibility” for their learning, this conception overlooks the resources (cognitive, behavioural, etc.) needed for autonomous learning during classes. One can assume that it could increase the risks of educational inequality since parents are endowed with more or fewer resources, cultural capital, educational knowledge, etc., to support their children and leads teachers to reluctantly adopt coercive practices when pupils do not possess them.

Notes

- 1 Project *Führung zur Selbstführung. Eine ethnographische Studie zu schulischen Settings des selbständigen Lernens* (2017–2022) (SNF-100019_173035/1), supported by the SNF and the Universities of Teacher Education Bern and Vaud. The project relies on participant observations and ethnographic interviews in five schools with different classroom organization in the French- and German-speaking parts of Switzerland.

2 Aliases

3 Oral and written quotations in French have been translated by the authors.

4 Strong level in mathematics.

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