

# Becoming an autonomous reader? Learning to read and philosophy in schools

Colloquium of the Cours de vacances, University of Lausanne (Switzerland)

A collaboration with the Centre Universitaire de Recherches sur l’Action Publique et le Politique – Épistémologie et Sciences Sociales (CURAPP-ESS), University of Picardie Jules Verne (Amiens, France)

Following on from the 2019 colloquium centred on “Learning how to read the others with care: reading, care and education” (see Érard & al. 2021), the 2022<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Cours de vacances colloquium will focus more specifically on the problematic of teaching/learning how to read in the first years of school.

Drawing from anthropology of education and of reading, from sociology of inequalities, didactics of reading, ordinary language philosophy, field philosophy and philosophy for/with children, this event will focus on early years education and preschool/beginning of primary school: “école maternelle” and CP in France; 1P-2P Harmos in French-speaking Switzerland.

Acknowledging research works in sociology about inequalities of access to literacy (Lahire 2019; Joigniaux 2013a, 2013b; Millet & Croizet 2016) – and keeping in mind issues related to allophony and dyslexia – this event will offer an opportunity to examine and discuss concrete and possible actions to promote equality among pupils in learning how to read, reading being understood here as an activity involving capacities in deciphering and abilities related to understanding the meaning of what is read. In this perspective, it will explore the resources offered by philosophy for/with children in order to renew our approaches of what it is to read texts with young children.

During these two days, we will propose a series of lectures as well as three “flipped classroom” workshops (see provisional programme), aiming at taking a critical look at the usual ways in which (pre-)reading is approached in the early years of school. By mobilising a conception of reading inherited from Wittgenstein’s (Wittgenstein 2004; Standish 2018) and Cavell’s (Cavell 2012a, 2012b; Saito & Standish 2012) philosophy of education, where “reading” is apprehended as an ordinary practice constituted of a large variety of language games (Stebler 2020), we would like to ask what “learning to read” can mean for children who do not yet know how to read.

By asking this question seriously, this colloquium could be an opportunity to look at the consensus that has gradually emerged among many specialists, who now widely advocate a “mixed” approach, thus recognizing the importance of a simultaneity in learning the code and understanding the meaning of texts (Dehaene 2019; Goigoux 2016; Goigoux & Cèbe

2004; Joigneaux 2013). In this context, we want to question the way in which the relationship between (pre-)reading activities and the reading of children's books is thought out and implemented in schools. For although reading is most often considered to be both a technique for decoding written words and a practice implying understanding, manipulating books, expressing thoughts, and so on, and although the authors of theories and methods now massively affirm that "learning to read is learning to identify sequences of written words and to understand their meaning" (Goigoux & Cèbe 2004: 19), it seems that no teaching tool available on the (French-speaking) market offers a concrete realisation of such an approach, most methods continuing to disconnect work on deciphering (grapheme-phoneme correspondence, syllable fusion, decoding of words and then of sentences) and work on understanding the meaning of what is being read (reading of picturebooks).

Such a conception of reading and its learning also opens the possibility of mobilizing the practice of philosophy to deepen children's understanding of what is read and their interest in reading. Several works have shed light on the philosophical dimension of literature (Diamond 1993; Nussbaum 1997; Raïd 2021), including children's literature (Chirouter 2015; Haynes & Murris 2012; Galichet 2019). Indeed, many methods of philosophy for/with children use stories or picturebooks as stimuli, especially with very young children (Kenyon et al. 2019; Stanley 2012; The Philosophy Foundation). The importance of the experience of reading together has been highlighted from the earliest works in this field (Lipman 2003: 97-98). However, the question of how philosophical practice relates to the learning of reading remains largely unexplored: most of the time, children are only invited to read the text themselves when they have become sufficiently comfortable with the technique of deciphering. Imagining philosophical practices in connection with the learning of reading (or as a way to learn how to read) could be a new field of exploration for philosophy for/with children, especially regarding practices with young children, which are rarely given specific consideration.

Several pedagogical devices will be placed at the heart of the discussions: as far as the teaching/learning of reading is concerned, the "Narramus" method (Cèbe & Goigoux 2018b; Cèbe, Roux-Baron & Goigoux 2018) – widely used in French schools – and the "Apprendre à Lire avant la lettre" method, developed at the University of Lausanne's Cours de vacances and experimented in some primary schools in French-speaking Switzerland (<https://www.eprouvette-unil.ch/evenement/lire-avant-la-lettre/>); in the field of philosophy for/with children, methods using picturebooks as stimuli will be presented. These methods will be presented in "flipped classroom" workshops in order to induce a conversation between the designers of these tools and devices, teachers who use them and researchers from different disciplines committed to designing concrete actions to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The colloquium can then be understood as a pedagogical laboratory where different conceptions of learning, of education, of reading and of philosophy, as well as different pedagogical practices will meet in order to pool efforts to promote the ability of pupils to read *by themselves* from an early age.

The question of the autonomy of the readers will thus receive particular attention in the lectures proposed during the two days of the colloquium. Understood as a new pedagogical ideal that has been imposed throughout the school system, including kindergarten, autonomy, which has gone from being an “aspiration” of each individual to a “condition” for all (Ehrenberg 2010), appears to be a crucial point when asking what kind of pedagogical actions would be able to make children capable of reading. Indeed, the question of autonomy – correlated with a strong “schoolification” of pre-school engendered by the development of a curricular approach (Leroy 2020) – is problematic when it comes to learning/teaching how to read: the child who does not whether he/she should start from the right or from the left, from the top or from the bottom, or where to write his or her name on an exercise sheet, is not in a situation of autonomy but in a situation of solitude and dependence. This child – whose performance is being assessed at an increasingly early age – must then ask for help from his or her teacher or from another child who is able to help. However, the ability to mobilise one’s own resources or extracurricular experiences is strongly correlated with social origin (Joignaux 2013c) and the children who are most often asked to help see their autonomy valued, while the others are singled out and may gradually see themselves as incapable children in what Millet and Croizet have described as a struggle for recognition at nursery school (Millet & Croizet 2016). Instead of making every child capable of reading, (pre-)primary school thus runs the risk of reinforcing inequalities in access to reading, although public policies assign it a mission to reduce them. What solutions can a democratic school find to give everyone an equal (confidence in their) ability to read and write? How can we think about autonomy so that it is not synonymous with inequality?

To approach these questions, different philosophical traditions will be put into conversation and connected to the reflection on pedagogical devices for teaching/learning reading and philosophy. Ordinary language philosophy (Wittgenstein 2004; Cavell 1996; Laugier 2021), philosophy as education (Saito & Standish 2012; Cavell 2012a, 2012b) and the anthropology as/of education (Ingold 2018a; 2018b) that draws on it (Das 2021, 2020; Érard 2017; Stebler 2020; Motta 2019) will, for example, be mobilised to outline a Wittgensteinian conception of understanding that is neither a state (an experience) nor a mental process, but a capacity (the mastery of a technique) that makes sense in an activity connected to other activities within a form of life. It can be signalled by a “Now I understand” which means “Now I am able to continue on my own” (Wittgenstein 2004; Stebler 2020). To take the example of reading aloud (Érard 2019), a learner reader's comprehension will be reflected in his/her ability to continue applying the rules of grapho-phonological correspondence by him/herself without being guided by a teacher or, in the case of understanding a story, by his/her ability to put the pictures or pages back in the right order. This way of seeing learning to read as learning a regulated practice (like learning a numerical sequence) has two consequences: the first is to conceive it as a normative learning by trial and error (through exercises) which cannot be done without the pupil being

guided. The second is to conceive it as a learning process aimed at building the learner's confidence in his or her ability to continue (to read, to think, to speak) on his/her own.

At the age of 4 or 5, a child can only learn to read if he/she is accompanied. But isn't "accompanying autonomy" a contradiction in terms? It is not if we change the way we look at autonomy (Maillard 2011) and dependence, drawing in particular on the ethics of care and/or relational ethics (Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000). Against an autonomy defined as self-government by reason (Kant 2020) or as the ability to choose one's own lifestyle (Mill 1990; Locke 1992, 1994), these ethics take an anthropological, contextual and particularistic approach to autonomy and claim that, in practice, there can be no autonomy without relationships. Feminist ethics and in particular care ethics (Gilligan 2008; Laugier & Paperman 2006; Laugier 2009; Molinier, Laugier & Paperman 2009) indeed insist on the relational character of human existence, and on the recognition of the interdependence of lives.

This relational conception of autonomy highlights the importance of collective learning experiences, especially of experiences of collective reading, both for the community of pupils and for the community of teacher-researchers. The practices of philosophical dialogue with children – more or less closely inspired from the "community of inquiry" model proposed by Lipman and Sharp (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980) – offer fertile ground in this respect. The cooperative and egalitarian pedagogy they implement aims to develop the ability to think for oneself (autonomous thinking) through collective reading and discussion, and ultimately, to enable intellectual emancipation and lay foundations for democratic citizenship. This conception of autonomy as developing in the interaction with others is based on the pragmatist rejection of the dualism between the individual and the community (Dewey 1991). It also gives a central place to care, understood both as concern for others (Sharp 2018) and as concern for what matters for thinking (Lipman 1995). By learning to read together, by learning to read the same book together, one learns to think, hear and find one's voice (Auderset & Érard 2019).

The entry into the world of writing could then be conceived as a mutual and relational education, because no one can say where the scope of a text and of what it can tell us begins and ends, and no one can say who is the teacher and who is the student in a common reading. In this mutual education (Cavell 2012a, 2012b), we are all teachers and all learners insofar as teaching/learning is conceived as an equality-producing game, where everyone can have a turn and choose to participate or suspend his/her participation. The importance of the game (Sensevy 2012) lies in its fragility because it is the guarantee of the players' consent. The justice and fairness of the pedagogical game ultimately depend on the possibility for each player to express his or her voice, in a society of consent.

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