

A Different Way of Teaching?

by Benoît Peuch

Educating children by respecting their spontaneous interests: Such is the promise of alternative pedagogies. Subjecting these promises to sociological critique, Ghislain Leroy shows that they are not necessarily emancipatory and may even contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities.

About: Ghislain Leroy, *Sociologie des pédagogies alternatives*, La Découverte, 2022, 128 p.

The “Montessori method” has grown in popularity in recent years: In France, the number of Montessori schools went from 125 in 2012¹ to 200 in 2021.² Other so-called “alternative” pedagogical approaches, including those of Freinet and Steiner, also seem to be attracting increasing interest. What these approaches have in common is the desire to teach children differently, to provide them with an emancipatory education that supports their creative and expressive capacities. In *Sociologie des pédagogies alternatives*, Ghislain Leroy presents an objective and critical examination of these projects based on a series of field studies. Are alternative pedagogies as emancipatory as they claim? Can they limit the reproduction of social inequalities? Do

¹ Marie-Laure Viaud, “Les écoles Montessori dans le monde,” *Revue internationale d’éducation*, 76, dec. 2017.

² This figure, cited in Leroy’s book, was published by *Association Montessori France* (AMF).

these pedagogies, which are commonly lumped together under the same label, share the same ideological commitments?”

Against Traditional Education: From New Pedagogies to Critical Pedagogies

Leroy begins by providing a literal definition of the term “alternative pedagogies”: On the one hand, these are *pedagogies* in the sense that they constitute theoretical and practical proposals on how to educate children; on the other hand, they are *alternative* insofar as they claim to do things differently from what is traditionally done in educational institutions. Advocates of new pedagogies level numerous criticisms at traditional school education: Its methods (for instance, the use of textbooks) are deemed boring and ineffective, its instructional content is considered elitist and useless, and its hierarchical and disciplinary organization is denounced as alienating. Leroy conducts a historical review of alternative educational projects that leads him to identify two very different currents: new pedagogies and critical pedagogies.

New pedagogies, which are represented by pedagogues as diverse as Célestin Freinet, Maria Montessori, Ovide Decroly, and Alexander Sutherland Neill, emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Leroy recalls, this pedagogical current promotes an education that is respectful of children’s natural spontaneity. Here, educating children does not entail making them learn out of obedience or obligation: rather, it consists in encouraging them to act on their own and in accordance with their interests. A very interesting feature of the book is the critique of the notion of “spontaneous interest.” Leroy argues that this notion often leads to the justification of practices that are not so much about letting children express themselves than they are about making them obey without feeling the weight of authority being imposed on them—for example, through benevolent incentives. The book also questions the notion of the “child’s interest,” which often presupposes that what the child does spontaneously when left to play freely (without any attempt to influence him or her) is the free expression of his or her natural character. As Leroy points out, research into child socialization³ tends to show that the development of a child’s individual

³ Wilfried Lignier and Julie Pagis, *L'enfance de l'ordre*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2017.

character largely depends on the environment in which he or she evolves from an early age, and that the child who plays freely has a tendency to reproduce behaviors and judgments specific to his or her social environment.

Critical pedagogies, for their part, emerged in the late 1960s. They were inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the oppressed* aimed to make individuals aware of the social inequalities from which they suffer—consciousness of oppression being the first step towards a possible emancipation. Leroy looks successively at feminist pedagogies, queer pedagogies, critical pedagogies of race, decolonial pedagogies, and critical ecopedagogy, little-known approaches that illustrate how alternative pedagogies are being renewed around proposals very different from those of the interwar period. These pedagogies give pride of place to artistic activities (especially theater), often considered by their advocates as a means of expression that makes it possible to emancipate oneself from dominant norms, be they patriarchal, heteronormative, or Eurocentric.

An important part of the book is devoted to the question of the ideological implications of alternative pedagogies. Leroy shows that these pedagogies are far from ideologically homogeneous: Some of them, like Freinet's, are openly socialist and seek to turn the child into an individual capable of actively participating in the collective life of the classroom; others, like Montessori's, are much more liberal in that they tend to individualize the child by focusing on his or her performance rather than on his or her ability to cooperate. Leroy's sociological approach helps to elucidate this ideological alternative in relation to the question of social inequality: Where "neoliberal" pedagogies tend to maintain the inequalities of an unjust social order based on individualism, competition, and profitability, socialist pedagogies (which Leroy prefers to call "subversive pedagogies" or "rational pedagogies") seek ways to make society more egalitarian.

Who Are the Actors Involved in Alternative Pedagogies?

One of the most original aspects of the book is the author's review of studies investigating the sociological profile of those involved in alternative pedagogies. Leroy reports that alternative educators are more likely to come from the dominant social classes, and that they tend to be older and more experienced. In addition, he notes that alternative pedagogies enable schoolteachers to increase the value of their

work and to compensate for the lack of professional legitimacy that they sometimes experience in their practice.

Leroy explores the training and work practices of educators, with a particular focus on the individual motivations of those who choose to engage in this type of pedagogy. Since the educational theories that underpin alternative pedagogies are poorly represented in the teacher training offered by the French Ministry of Education, educators learn these theories on their own, including by gathering information on the Internet or by doing unpaid internships on their own time. Moreover, in some cases, alternative pedagogies are more demanding in terms of preparation than traditional pedagogies: The organization of uncommon events (trips, for example), the design of teaching materials, and the demands of sustained teamwork all require educators to invest more time and effort in their work.

Leroy also addresses the question of the future of students who benefit from these methods. Here, the results of field studies are ambivalent. On the one hand, these students appear to adapt better to the demands of higher education. They also sometimes consider that these pedagogies have allowed them to acquire a more critical mindset than they would have if they had received traditional education. We may wonder, however, whether these assessments are not the result of students' internalization of the pedagogical discourse conveyed by their educators. On the other hand, some testimonies shed light on the difficulties students sometimes experience when they are brutally confronted with traditional methods. One student went so far as to say: "After spending time in heaven, I descended into hell..."⁴

Beyond the Alternative/Traditional Opposition?

The book is also very interesting in that it goes beyond the simplistic alternative/traditional opposition by examining how traditional pedagogies can integrate some of the proposals of alternative pedagogies. Leroy, however, urges caution: While such re-appropriations do exist, they are far from ideologically neutral. Traditional approaches retain only the most liberal of these proposals, and even subvert the most socialist ones by making them more individualistic and less

⁴ This quotation is taken from Henri Peyronie, *Le mouvement Freinet : du fondateur charismatique à l'intellectuel collectif. Regard socio-historique sur une alternative éducative et pédagogique*, Caen, PUC, 2013.

emancipatory. According to the author, socio-constructivist approaches, which have inspired educators and official texts since the 1980s, are the result of the liberal instrumentalization of new pedagogies. Proposing to organize instruction around problem situations that enable children to discover what they need to learn by themselves rather than through authoritative transmission, socio-constructivism pursues the objectives of instruction, efficiency, and performance and sets aside the goal of combating social inequalities.

However, while traditional practices can be influenced by liberal proposals and even, as Leroy briefly points out, by conservative ones, it is unclear why the influence of socialist proposals is overlooked in the book. Traditional educators are certainly aware of the existence of social inequalities and are quite capable of taking them into account when looking for ways to improve their practices. By grounding his reflection on an exclusive opposition between neoliberal and socialist pedagogies, Leroy finds himself unable to examine closely the tensions in which actors are sometimes caught—for instance, when they seek to reduce social inequalities without abandoning the goal of educating children effectively. Had he pushed the reflection in this direction, he might have been able to present alternative pedagogies as places of experimentation that are located on the margins of traditional school institutions and that can stimulate actors to reflect on their own practices (whatever their ideological commitments).

Moreover, although the ideological critique of educational practices seems entirely appropriate, it is regrettable that Leroy's descriptions of "rational" pedagogies, which purport to reduce inequalities, are terribly imprecise. The only truly concrete example he offers is Sandrine Garcia and Anne-Claudine Oller's experiments in the teaching of reading skills.⁵ Even so, the example is disappointing. Leroy notes that this emancipatory pedagogy involves early work on decoding, syllable dictation, reading aloud, as well as a differentiated approach that helps to support pupils in difficulty. In the light of this description, it is difficult to see how Garcia and Oller's approach differs from those currently in use in the most traditional first grade courses. Leroy also seems to suggest that this mysterious rational pedagogy is "explicit" insofar as it continually ensures that the child has a clear and distinct awareness of what he or she is learning. Without necessarily questioning this proposition, one may wonder, once again, whether this explicit pedagogy differs from that which is now expressly prescribed in the official programs of the French Ministry

⁵ Sandrine Garcia & Anne-Claudine Oller, *Réapprendre à lire. De la querelle des méthodes à l'action pédagogique*, Paris, Seuil, 2015.

of Education.⁶ Despite these reservations, *Sociologie des pédagogies alternatives* remains a highly stimulating work that clearly illustrates the kind of critical insight that the sociology of education can offer to enrich pedagogical reflection.

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⁶ In the Cycle 2 (first to third grade) programs, there are no fewer than fifteen passages recalling the need for explicit teaching. Here is an example: "Teaching must be structured and explicit. The teacher must give meaning to learning, but must also view it as a progressive process. Children arriving in Cycle 2 are very different from one another. They have grown up and learned in a variety of family and school contexts, all of which have a strong influence on learning and its pace."