

## **Teachers' educational mediation and the role of benevolence in the fight against early school leaving**

### **La mediazione educativa degli insegnanti e il ruolo della benevolenza nella lotta all'abbandono scolastico**

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#### **Abstract**

The benevolent relationship that a teacher has with a pupil fosters the acquisition of knowledge. A relationship of this kind is not always easy to establish. Benevolence in teaching requires a pupil to be considered as a whole. This attention to the pupil is one of the dimensions of educational mediation. This article examines the taking into consideration of the pupil in school interactions. Thus, the concept of mediation represents all the learning aids used by teachers and is organised around the interaction between (teachers' and pupils') schemas (Numa-Bocage, 2007). It requires a benevolent stance on the part of the teachers which in turn makes it possible to fight against dropping out of school. Four examples of secondary-school research illustrate the benevolent dimension in mediation: using a game for the purposes of inclusive education; using self-confrontation in a group of students for the purpose of developing teaching practices; videorecording and the importance of taking into account what young people have to say; and listening and paying attention to young apprentices during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ways to fight dropping out are identified.

**Keywords:** dropping out of school, educational mediation, benevolence, school interactions.

#### **Sommario**

Il rapporto benevolo che un insegnante ha con un allievo favorisce l'acquisizione della conoscenza. Un rapporto di questo tipo non è sempre facile da stabilire. La benevolenza nell'insegnamento richiede che un allievo sia considerato nel suo insieme. Questa attenzione all'alunno è una delle dimensioni della mediazione educativa. Questo articolo esamina la presa in considerazione dell'alunno nelle interazioni scolastiche. Pertanto, il concetto di mediazione rappresenta tutti i sussidi didattici utilizzati dagli insegnanti ed è organizzato attorno all'interazione tra schemi (insegnanti e alunni) (Numa-Bocage, 2007). Richiede una posizione benevola da parte degli insegnanti che a sua volta consente di lottare contro l'abbandono scolastico. Quattro esempi di ricerca nella scuola secondaria illustrano la dimensione benevola della mediazione: utilizzare un gioco ai fini dell'educazione inclusiva; utilizzare l'auto-confronto in un gruppo di studenti allo scopo di sviluppare pratiche di insegnamento; la videoregistrazione e l'importanza di tenere conto di ciò che i giovani hanno da dire; e ascoltare e prestare attenzione ai giovani apprendisti durante la pandemia Covid-19. Vengono identificati i modi per combattere l'abbandono scolastico.

**Parole chiave:** abbandono scolastico, mediazione educativa, benevolenza, interazioni scolastiche.

#### **Introduction**

The complexity of the educational situation (Morin, 2005) has been highlighted by the study of school mediation (Carre and Weil-Barais, 2000; Vygotski, 1934/1997) or of systems that give young people a voice (Cauvier and Desmarais, 2013; Bruno *et al.*, 2017). From this perspective, taking into consideration a young person as a whole (paying attention to their feelings, opinions, and words) in the educational process (Merri and Numa-Bocage, 2019) reinforces this complexity. I will examine this form of considering the person (Rogers, 1969; Wallon, 1941). I will do so by using four case studies drawn from research carried out in French secondary schools. I will identify factors in mediation process (Numa-Bocage, 2007) that allow the teacher to take the pupil into consideration as a person in their entirety. This article is part of analyses drawn from broader

collaborative research aimed at, among other things, finding pathways to school retention and perseverance in order to fight against dropping out.

## 1. Complexity of the educational situation

### *Teachers' benevolent relationship*

Benevolence is commonly defined as the affective disposition of a will that seeks the good and happiness of others, a disposition that is particularly favourable towards someone. I propose to take a closer look at *benevolence* (from Latin *benevolentia*) which, inspired by Confucian philosophy, means the will and the act of doing good. In my view, a benevolent teacher is one who really focuses on a pupil as a person, trying to understand their particular problems as they seek to and take action to help them develop to the best of their abilities based on who they are. A benevolent teacher will encourage pupils' fulfilling progress towards academic knowledge. They are full of favourable dispositions towards their pupils, attentive, generous, welcoming, and mindful of the emotions and feelings of their pupils in order to adjust their interventions to their level of understanding and thus provide effective support. They facilitate good relations within the classroom, between themselves and their pupils, between pupils, and between pupils and knowledge. They thus show consideration for their pupils and treat them supportively by refraining from harming them and, above all, by working towards their fulfilment, without being naively optimistic. It involves making sure that a pupil's relationship with the school (teacher, knowledge, peers, and institution) is good in order to avoid their dropping out (Numa-Bocage, 2017).

### *Preventing dropping out of schools*

The European Commission defines dropping out in terms of its main effect: «Europe has far too many young people leaving education without the skills they need to participate in the knowledge society and to move smoothly into employment<sup>1</sup>» (europa.eu). For Bernard (Bernard, 2019) dropping out is a process that leads a young person in initial training to detach themselves from the training system until they leave it before obtaining a qualification. It is therefore a function of leaving the school system, with dropouts being defined as those who leave school without a qualification or leave it early, or young people without a qualification who are not in training.

It is a gradual process of losing interest in school, coming from an accumulation of factors both internal and external to the school system, a temporary interruption of studies, explains Desmarais (2013).

Between 2006 and 2011 the French *atlas of social risks of school failure* produced by DEPP (Direction de l'Évaluation, de la Prospective et de la Performance – Department of Assessment, Foresight and Performance) and CÉREQ (Centre d'Étude et de Recherches sur les Qualifications – Centre for Qualifications Study and Research) showed an increase in social and educational inequalities at a regional level. Early school leaving and social exclusion were also singled out in an OECD study (Society at a Glance 2014)<sup>2</sup> on the employment and social integration of young people, particularly with regard to French schools. France is among the countries with the most young people neither in employment nor training (NEET) who have a strong feeling of social distrust.

Sociological approaches that look at drop-out factors (particularly the dropouts' parents' socio-professional category and level of qualifications, or the social composition of institutions) do not take into account pupils' personal problems. Approaches exploring

reasons for dropping out (great difficulties at school, rejection of the school institution, the attraction of working life, discouragement, personal problems) are left aside.

The mechanisms of dropping out have been illuminated by studies that clearly involve the workings of the school. Bernard (Bernard, 2017) explains that dropouts are also young people who are *fed up with school*, and their relationships with their parents and peers (Hernandez *et al.*, 2013) matter in this process. One of the prerequisites for avoiding dropping out is to foster meaningful learning among students in order to improve their educational success.

Several reports have denounced a linear, sequential, fragmented vision of learning, training, and personal development. This vision does little to encourage consultation among teaching staff. The organisation of school activities does not always allow for a better integration of knowledge and tutorial support for pupils.

*How is the pupil actually taken into account?*

The objectives of a benevolent school interaction that fights against dropping out are linked to teachers' ability to adapt to the diversity of school audiences and to different teaching (and, more broadly, educational) situations. In this respect I agree with the views of Biscaldi (Biscaldi, 2020) who distinguishes between the teaching dimension, the educational dimension, and the politics of the relationship between pupil and teacher, attributing equal importance to each of these. Research carried out in a 2.0 institute from pupils' point of view shows, among other things, that those who ask for more understanding from their teachers consider them to be not very competent and rather distant. It further highlights the fact that the expected skills are technological, innovative, and organisational in nature, as if the new context of social distancing due to the Covid-19 crisis has not changed anything in the ways pupils do things. This underlines the fact that the current situation has not led to a restructured educational relationship or a greater desire on the part of the teachers to take responsibility for learning, as they refuse to place themselves in a position of critical self-reflexivity with regard to their practices. Biscaldi concludes that the inability of young people to react and the inability of teachers to question themselves create an impasse. These elements contribute to the breakdown of the relationship which, far from being benevolent, leads to early school leaving. A relationship is expected in which one learns to develop one's critical thinking by discussing various worlds of meaning (Merri and Numa-Bocage, 2018). I fully subscribe to Biscaldi's idea that this lack of awareness of the political role played by education leads to a flattening of the educational relationship which becomes a relationship subject to the logic of knowledge transmission, in which education is conceived and offered as a service, a product to be measured rather than a process to be constructed intentionally and consciously.

I therefore propose to shift the focus of prevention goals from young people to teachers and their training. Understanding the conditions in which dropping out occurs makes it possible to design systems for training staff that are able to take preventive action.

Indeed, following the initial observations of the Canadian team *Partage* (Desmarais, 2013) and Biscaldi's results, it appears that our understanding is helped if we take into account the views of the actors themselves as well as the process which explains the reasons for both dropping out and returning to school, whether in relation to young people from France, Italy, or Quebec. If a demand for support for professional practices (Bruno *et al.*, 2017) is still one of educational actors' concerns, this means that the existing systems can still be improved. These initial results lead us to consider the views of the

actors involved and identify indicators of the conditions in which dropping out occurs, in order to encourage returning to school and perseverance.

Returning to school is a process (Bouchard and Saint-Amant, 1993). Possible courses of action were put forward in the report by Frédérique Weixler (Cit. in Weixler and Soudoplatoff, 2015)<sup>3</sup>. One key proposal was to make schools more benevolent by setting up tutorial systems, seeking to mobilise staff through a return to training, and proposing a *week of perseverance*, among other measures. However, this report did not take stock of the measures already in place and did not take into account school partners. The European Union proposes specific cases of policies for combating early school leaving, reflecting on the criteria for this phenomenon and the policies to be pursued. It clearly highlights social criteria (young immigrants are twice as likely to drop out of school as others), the way the education system itself works, the practice of repeating a year, the early selection of pupils, and youth employment, and it calls for combating school segregation, managing the transition from primary to secondary education, and developing a benevolent attitude.

We can therefore conclude that the system is organised in such a way that young people are unable to find the necessary conditions for their best personal and intellectual development at school. To quote Weil-Barais (Study Day, 12 June 2020, BONHEURS Research Unit), «it is my belief that, when an institution fails, it is not the pupils but institutional performance that needs looking at». In other words, what is needed is a paradigm shift.

## 2. Educational mediation

Within the paradigm of professional didactics (Pastré *et al.*, 2006) the concept of educational mediation (Numa-Bocage, 2015) – which represents all the learning aids used by teachers and is organised around the interaction between (teachers' and pupils') schemas – helps to develop the attention that needs to be paid to pupils. In order to help pupils to adapt to the rapid changes taking place in society, it is necessary to develop problem-solving strategies, foster a better understanding of natural phenomena, and provide systems for analysis and informed decision-making.

Through educational mediation I seek to question institutional performance by introducing new tools, measures, and instruments. Leaving aside the novelty of the tools, however, educational mediation places the emphasis on reasoning and cognitive functioning. When young children (aged 2 or 3) learn to write using pen and paper they also develop skills and abilities for other intellectual activities. Learning to write using pen and paper is one of primary school's specific activities. In their practices, primary-school teachers have abilities to help young pupils in this apprenticeship. Thus, some educational practices that may have disappeared from the social world (because of TV, computer, smartphone, etc.) and have formative qualities are typically educational and scholastic activities which deserve to be preserved because they help to develop cognitive abilities. There is a know-how around these practices, as well as an efficiency and way of carrying them out (forming circles in playgrounds before make them on paper, games, etc). In all these acts, human mediation is absolutely essential. We do not learn on our own but always with the help of others. It is only when we are already highly autonomous and have already developed cognitive abilities that we learn on our own. In the case of young people and at the beginning of the learning process it is important to maintain a benevolent group so that words may circulate and everything may be said without constraint or value judgement. Pupils' words are very important and need to be taken into account in school. This is a transformation of the school paradigm: pupils are persons and

their points of view need to be considered during apprenticeship. Whatever is said can be negotiated during discussions. This paradigm shift therefore involves teachers in the organisation of education and in the quality of the relationship needed to fight against dropping out of school and encourage returning to it and persevering in one's learning.

Various research has been carried out to assess measures. But rather than individual success factors, it is their combination in very different local configurations that has been noted. It appears that these are more classical teaching methods than expected, which nevertheless open up the possibility of success by going beyond simply passing exams or changing class levels. They are based on having confidence in pupils' potential, maintaining a serene school climate that fosters learning and wellbeing, where interdisciplinary work and specific attention paid to each pupil as a person are far more important than elsewhere. It is this attention which in mediation encourages us to take into consideration each pupil as a person (Walloon, 1941), in order to fight against early school leaving by means of cognitive, cultural, and identity dimensions related to the subject's development.

This relational dynamic takes shape within groups and adaptive forms need to be envisaged. These take into account young people's problems, the knowledge to be acquired, the contexts and conditions of this learning, with the support of teachers. We should go further and explain not *to* but *with* pupils the objectives to be achieved so as to help them develop critical thinking skills and autonomy, by combining benevolence with high standards. Educational mediation makes this combination possible as we take into consideration each pupil as a whole, their life experiences, their life stories, and the progress they have been making. Better teacher-pupil communication (Numa-Bocage and Pacurar, 2019) and working with parents in dealing with ethnic differences (Wilgus and Numa-Bocage, 2019) are examples of this educational mediation and its effect on early school leaving. Four examples of research in French secondary schools (pupils aged 14 to 20) illustrate the dimension of benevolence in mediation.

### 3. Case studies

#### *Using a game for the purposes of inclusive education in a French collège*

Following mixed PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) survey results for France<sup>4</sup>, analyses have revealed contradictions pertaining to this country. From the first study conducted in 2000 and subsequently (OECD PISA, 2012 and 2015) it has been found that, although France's results are average among OECD countries, they reveal a system in which children's socio-economic situation overdetermines their school performance and children from disadvantaged social backgrounds are not sufficiently supported. The surveys also highlight French pupils' higher level of anxiety compared to their counterparts in the other OECD countries. The TIMSS 2020 survey has shown a significant drop in French pupils' maths results. The ability of a system to help its pupils with difficulties – mainly those from a disadvantaged or immigrant background – to make progress improves that system's overall quality and thus its overall performance<sup>5</sup>. The emphasis then is on contributing to pupils' personal and academic development, as well as working well together with their parents, leading to a decrease in the proportion of pupils who fail at school and an increase in those who do well.

In France, however, investment in education does not always reach these milieus (disadvantaged or immigrant). The French overseas *départements* (including Martinique), which are particularly concerned by this issue, have been *forgotten* (Arneton, 2016). Teachers have a fundamental role to play in these reforms. It is in this

context that the experiments at the *S. collège*<sup>6</sup> were encouraged. A learning project that took into account the cultural environment of *collège* pupils and sought to develop disciplinary learning (history, the subject of slavery) and living together (pupils from ordinary and special-education classes) was carried out with ordinary third-year (*quatrième*) and SEGPA<sup>7</sup> classes (Arneton and Numa-Bocage, 2018). Previous research had shown the importance of the cultural dimension in learning (stemming from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development) in the case of pupils with difficulties (Vergnaud, 2008, 2011): culture and language support cognitive development. In 2015-2016 this experiment was conducted again in the *collège* as part of a collaborative action-research project which used a board game called *Awalé*. It involved teachers of history and geography, plastic arts, and French who worked with these classes.

A qualitative methodology was used: cross-referencing observational data (videorecording of one day of discussions between the pupils from the two levels while the rules of the game were being taught by ordinary third-year pupils to SEGPA pupils) and semi-structured interviews with the pupils and school staff.

The initiative concluded with an intercultural exchange with another *collège* and the production of various pieces: the making of a wooden *Awalé* (with the help of families), a video report, the creation of a story, a digital book, and a theatre play with adapted costumes and set, which were presented during a cultural event at the *collège* on the day of the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Martinique (22nd of May). The pupils' pleasure in learning through this *awalé-game* project contributed to the construction of transcultural knowledge while fostering wellbeing and inclusion in the school. Indeed, the project harmoniously combined school subjects and placed the emphasis on learning concepts (in history, maths), wellbeing in school, inclusion, and the development of pupils' identities.

Young people were asked about their relationship with school, the learning they had constructed, and their interest in attending the *collège*. These semi-structured interviews involved, among others, young people at risk of dropping out. Focusing on pupils' statements showed ways of returning to school. The pleasure of learning, sharing, and discovering the other were expressed, and the cognitive stimulation (mathematical and historical, through the game) without risk and without losing face made it possible to overcome the difficulty of learning. Conceptualisation in action through play, as well as teachers' mediating action in the organisation of pupils' interactions are a reassuring means to achieve inclusive education in *collèges* (Vergnaud, 2008, 2011). Pupils further became aware of the place of slavery in the history of Martinique and their own. Intergenerational meetings (village elders were interviewed) and the construction of transcultural knowledge (Porcher and Abdallah-Pretceille, 1998; Abdallah-Pretceille, 2008; Akkari, 2009) also played a part: «I learnt a lot of things I didn't know about slavery; school is good when you do activities like this; yes, learning by playing» (Young girl, 14 years old, student, Martinique, may 2015). Adding new knowledge to pupils' previous knowledge allows schemas to adapt and evolve thanks to teachers' mediating actions.

These activity analyses suggest that the relationship each person has with their culture(s) of origin is also one of the factors at play in the schooling process. It is necessary to be able to take into account what a pupil has to say and lead them to reach an awareness that favours the construction of knowledge. An analysis informed by the educational-mediation diagram (Numa-Bocage, 2007, 2015) helps us identify dimensions which, in the project carried out at the *S. collège*, are part of a mediation process that favours inclusive education and living well (fig. 1).

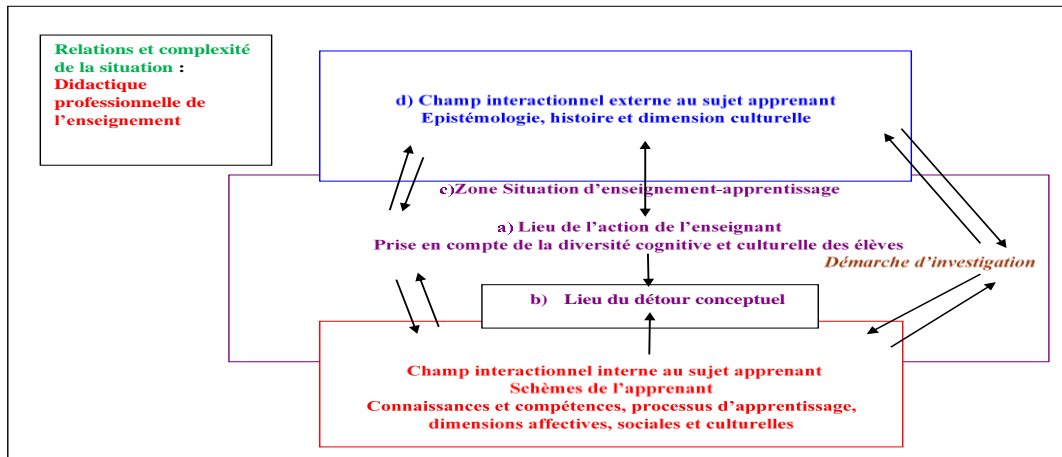


Fig. 1: Differentiated educational mediation with a cultural dimension, game project, S. collège.

1. Locus of teachers' actions: the teaching-learning of the rules of the game between pupils and of the history of slavery using the digital book, the interactions between pupils and teachers enabled the processes of educational mediation which led to the development of knowledge.
2. Locus of conceptual detour: this is the conceptual characteristic of educational mediation, the development of knowledge and identity awareness of the post-slavery filiation by bringing together teachers' and pupils' schemas.
3. Teaching-learning area: material creations (games, digital book) are exhibited and presented in spaces such as the playground where pupils learn the rules of the game.
4. Interactional field external to the subject: it is the (physical and organisational) locus of meetings with partners, the locus of teaching-educational organisation for the teachers and the educational team of the *collège*.

Like SEGPA teachers, maths teachers in vocational secondary schools are confronted with the difficulty of making pupils who have not chosen their course of study like maths and who are failing at this subject, failing at school overall, or are in the process of dropping out. Thus, some of these teachers use types of educational mediation that encourage school perseverance and reinforce the feeling of wellbeing at school.

*Self-confrontation in a group of young people and the use of a focus group for the purpose of developing teaching practices*

The focus of this research was the analysis of pupil activity in maths classes (Tremblay et Kahn, 2017) and was based on a self-confrontation methodology using video recordings, which was innovative in that the pupils themselves participated in the analysis. The role of maths in a pupil's development, learning and becoming an active citizen, the reflective dimension and knowing oneself are the advantages of this system.

The PISA study looks at 15-year-olds which corresponds to the first year of *lycée* (representing the final three years of secondary school in France). The method was based on: 1. observing and videorecording personalised-support (PS) sessions in maths, 2. studying the interview through the self-confrontation of the teacher involved in the PS session, 3. designing a methodological-learning film for pupils by drawing on these sessions, 4. showing pupils the editing and recording of this new PS session by using self-confrontation, 5. a new self-confrontation session with the teacher. The comments of the teacher confronted with images of their activities and pupils' comments on these activities

enable educational and teaching readjustments for the purposes of effective mediation (Numa-Bocage, 2008). It appears that this double self-confrontation interview with the teacher helps the latter to better know their pupils and their learning processes. It further helps them to develop professionally by modifying their teaching schemas which become better suited to pupils' difficulties and needs. (Numa-Bocage, 2020). The pupils' self-confrontation interviews have an influence on the teacher's course design, educational mediation, and professional development.

In the third example (Numa-Bocage, 2017) the return to school is encouraged by a revitalisation of one's relationship to knowledge and learning (Desmarais, 2013) at the teacher's initiative. It is the example of a first year (*seconde*) of vocational *lycée* (Albert, 2015) working on a feeling of incompetence that had been expressed in this class. The method chosen was a focus group: a debate organised by the adult between pupils (groups of 6 or 7), which lasted 15 minutes, and was (audio) recorded, being led by the teacher (AA) who seldom intervened, listened, and allowed everyone to speak. The sentence under discussion, written on the board, came from a pupil's comment: «I can't do it and I've always been rubbish at maths» (Young boy, 16 years old, student, Paris, 2015) All pupils were free to speak and express themselves. AA transcribed the recording and analysed what was said following specific stages: identify pupils' expectations and needs (for support, recognition); draw conclusions in terms of possible courses of action for the teacher (change in teaching practice, specific help for certain pupils, motivational support). AA focused on identifying the specific characteristics of pupils' learning schemas. This analysis resulted in changes in the assessment system which became less prescriptive and more formative and adapted to each individual. Young people's comments express the need to be taken into consideration as individuals in their own right.

#### *Videorecording and the importance of considering what young people have to say*

Early school leaving was revisited here from a psychopedagogical perspective based on pupils' comments (Cook-Sather, 2002; Florin, 1987). Drawing on reflections on educational tools and artefacts, we looked again at the conditions in which pupils made a film and used their own words to discuss teacher SW's use of video recordings to prevent dropping out of *lycée* (Merri and Numa-Bocage, 2019). In his historical-cultural theory of the psyche Vygotski (1934-1997) showed the importance of symbolic instruments such as words in the development of thinking and learning. A qualitative approach was used to study and analyse interviews conducted with pupils in the first and second year of *lycée* (potential dropouts or not). The films made by the pupils formed the corpus. All *lycée* pupils expressed the need for an education that was free and different from traditional education, over and above the instrumental value of the videorecording option. The quality of the teacher-pupil relationship is a determining factor in returning to and staying in school, but requires teachers to be trained to listen to their pupils.

The clinical content analysis of the interaction between SW and her pupils focused on the teacher's positioning. Seeing a learner as a person and seeking to understand them means accepting them together with their culture, their assets, as well as their differences – this has favoured the development of knowledge. Mediation but also the transition from artefact (film) to instrument (Rabardel, 1995) enabled pupils to learn and act, while issues of adult support (Bruner, 1987) and educational mediation (Numa-Bocage, 2007) in this relationship between teacher and pupils encouraged this development. Such a relationship is built on trust.



The videorecording option provided the opportunity to give emotion, authenticity, and beauty for oneself a place in school interactions, without losing sight of knowledge. Some of the young people's comments expressed the institutional violence felt by *lycée* pupils confronted mainly with traditional forms of teaching that require them to remain seated and passive. This underlines the importance of a flexible way of organising the class in which pupils are listened to and supports the analyses put forward by Melin (Melin, 2010) and Carra (Carra, 2009). Melin has pointed out that trust between teacher and pupil in a drop-out situation is based on recognising the resources of the individual in difficulty rather than stigmatising their shortcomings. Carra has suggested that one should be aware of the potentialities of the others, respect them and consider them as whole persons in their own right, which is what we find in the processes of educational mediation. The game project, the self-confrontation, the focus group, and the videorecording option enable the development of creativity and allow for inventiveness in teaching and learning.

*Listening and paying attention to young apprentices during the pandemic*

In the global pandemic we are currently experiencing the following example bears witness to the experiences of young apprentices living in boarding schools and leads us to see particular collective dynamics. Like much of the world, our lives have taken an important turn since the spread of the coronavirus, so we decided to listen to young people, including these boarders, as part of a research project still in progress. Their history teacher RK explained:

The school has not been spared in this upheaval. Apprentices, teachers, trainers, everyone has had to adapt their way of learning or transmitting. Many questions arose, the first of which was getting organised. How to continue one's training and feed oneself while in boarding school? (RK, 36 years old, history teacher, Paris, September 2020).

RK, a teacher and a trainer at a vocational training centre near Paris, approached the situation by taking into account the views of the apprentices (third-year CAP<sup>8</sup> group) and then suggesting that they think about the situation by reflecting on the words *lockdown* and *pandemic*.

He decided to do a vocabulary exercise with his pupils which consisted of finding out the meaning of the words "to lock down" and "lockdown", stripping and dissecting them in order to understand all their nuances. The young people's first reaction was one of astonishment since these words meant distancing, confining, living cut off from the world and within oneself, curtailing freedom, and isolating. One can see why the pupils then asked themselves: «Are we dangerous? Have we become a threat? Are we locked like prisoners, sir?» (young boys, 16-20 years old, from the training center, Paris, 2020). They were anxious and eager to hear reassuring explanations. The exercise continued with discussions aimed at explaining this unprecedented situation using the little scientific and medical information that was available, without either minimising or causing panic. There was a need to reassure and allay anxieties while keeping the focus on learning and finishing one's diploma. The third stage consisted of studying the words *epidemic* and *pandemic* and understanding their commonalities and differences. The young apprentices discovered words they didn't know. The teacher became a youth worker, he listened and reassured, without ever falling into pathos. He was at one and the same time a teacher, mediator, and support worker in an atypical situations.

At the end of these intense and rich debates it was decided together with the apprentices to turn this unexpected moment of lockdown into something positive. At the institutional level<sup>9</sup> staff organised themselves in order to continue face-to-face learning, or distance learning in some cases. RK opted for face-to-face learning since, over and above his job as a teacher, he saw himself as a youth and health worker. Groups were reduced in size, tables were spaced out, and masks and hand sanitisers were made available. Gradually anguish gave way to a new, reconstructed life. Classes thus became groups of three to five pupils (depending on the day) who attended personalised teaching workshops. RK developed a multidisciplinary approach as he was in charge of ensuring teaching continuity in French, English, history, and geography. The timetable was adjusted, allowing pupils to sleep a little longer and be in classroom at 8.30 a.m. instead of the usual 8 a.m. RK established rituals for each day, talking about each other and the news, which took up about fifteen minutes. Discussions concerned news about Covid-19 in a particular country or French region.

These small changes marked the beginning of a significant transformation in the pupils who had once been hostile to learning, and they were particularly happy to come to class. The anxieties and reticence of before had been replaced by a kind of conviviality within the school, between the pupils themselves and between staff, despite social distancing. Starting from a paradoxical, even stressful situation, they had gradually become people who were working in all simplicity in a context they had been far from imagining a few weeks before.

In his mediation dynamic RK developed methods for his apprentices who became accustomed to trying to understand, analyse, or learn from everything they were used to doing. Apprentices coming from abroad (Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal) felt safer than outside where they could be stopped by police several times a day, something which they resented. The results of the assessments and continuous training checks carried out before the qualification exams which they took in June were positively impacted by their involvement and they all passed. As the days went by, a kind of solidarity developed between the pupils on the one hand and between teachers and youth workers on the other.

#### **4. Pupils' views on the current situation**

Our action-research project entitled *Djeuns'ContreCovid* (Young People against Covid), which is supported by AUF<sup>10</sup>, has been taking place since the beginning of lockdown in France. It has made it possible to interact with young people from different countries. These are listened to as they recount their experiences of this situation and how they keep up with school in specific ways which take into account the health measures applied in their countries. We were surprised by the maturity of some of the answers to our questions and the pupils' suggestions. We noticed, whatever the age, an impressive understanding of the situation, significant following of the news on the media and social networks, and reflections on one's place and role in this crisis situation.

It is important to listen to what students have to say about what they are experiencing during this period before systematically seeking to *fill the gaps*. We can see that these young people, whatever their age and educational level, all tried to live through this period as best as they could, maintaining their pleasure in learning in the face of adversity. It would, I believe, be a mistake not to give them the opportunity to talk about this experience, with the obligation for the adults of the school (teachers and others) to listen to them, that is, to try to understand beyond words the transformation and the learning achieved during this period; this requires grasping what may have brought joy despite the

circumstances. Taking the time to listen to young people before imposing any teaching approach is essential, it is a stage in educational mediation.

Families have a key role to play in preventing dropping out of school as well as in returning to it, even more so during the pandemic we are living through. During the first wave and lockdown France experienced in the spring of 2020, young people aged between 6 and 20 talked about how they felt about this situation. One important outcome has been pupils wanting to attend school and parents becoming aware of the reality of the teaching profession. Indeed, home schooling and playing the role of a teacher was very difficult for parents, who were not trained to teach. Teaching is a profession and a parent cannot be improvised into a teacher. This is what the parents understood and expressed in their testimonies.

### **5. Early school leaving, prevention, and educational mediation**

Early school leaving leads us to study the trio of dropping out, mediation, and perseverance. It is a response to the pupils' request for consideration. A relationship of this kind is not always easy to establish. Through our research on drop-out prevention we have been able to identify various levers that help to develop actors' power to act and ultimately to fight against early school leaving and support perseverance. These levers involve particular artefacts or systems, giving room for learners to express themselves and their views: using a game, self-confrontation in a group of young people for the purpose of developing teaching practices, videorecording and the importance of considering what young people have to say, or listening and paying attention to young apprentices during the pandemic. The fight against early school leaving requires a benevolent stance on the part of the teacher, whatever the level. The essential thing is to understand that, over and above the system itself, adult mediation is crucial in avoiding dropping out as well as encouraging returning to and then persevering in school. Hence the importance of psychological approaches in training youth workers and teachers.

The first approaches we developed on the issue of early school leaving were guided by the study of the forms that educational mediation took. Listening to pupils has made it clear that they are in great need of attention and consideration; teachers should have additional training in developmental psychology to meet this need. The pupil is considered overall, as a person, in the sense established by Henri Wallon's psychology. The concept of educational mediation makes it possible to tackle the issue of early school leaving from an analytical and pragmatic perspective, with implications for teacher training. School perseverance, approached by studying what pupils have to say about their school experiences, shows that young people hold the key to potential solutions for staying in school and we need to listen to them.

Educational mediation studies the various forms of learning aids and their interrelationships in teaching and education. It starts from the premise that both teacher and pupil are involved in the learning process and as such both contribute to its success. The question of how learning and later schooling are successful, therefore without dropping out for good, is still open and educational mediation gives us clues as to the relationships that need to be deepened: benevolence, taking pupils into consideration, educational approach, training teachers in developmental psychology, and the professional development of the teachers themselves.

### **Conclusions**

Taking young people into consideration is a dimension of educational mediation and the fight against early school leaving. In this fight, the examples that give pupils their rightful place in understanding the process and in developing possible solutions as part of a psychopedagogical and developmental approach constitute a mediational proposal for returning to school and perseverance. Certain invariants have been identified: the need for freedom, movement, and culture; the desire to connect with peers; and the need for benevolent support. Pupils thus develop schemas which they use elsewhere. They are all attentive, fascinated by images, and videorecording as well as games and digital technology are good tools for returning to school. The examples presented here correspond to innovative actions carried out by teachers benevolently and perceived as such by pupils.

Thus, the conditions for a successful transition back to school have been identified. First, pupils express explicit intentionality: information on learning expectations and concerted plural (teamwork) support helps them return to school. This is a training process where learning develops gradually and is based on the development of self-confidence, improved self-esteem, with the support of the teachers. The willingness of the teachers to be there for the pupils helps to reassure the latter and provide them with other modes of interaction conducive to learning. However, teachers are not trained to listen in this way; it is likely that training in the analysis of practices with a view to professional didactics would enable them to develop their educational practices.

Thus, by using an approach aimed at combining disciplines and methodologies, we have developed an understanding of the phenomenon of early school leaving by studying the dynamics of the interactions between actors and by explaining their choices within the conceptual framework of educational mediation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The generic definition of the European Community serves as a global reference in our research. It can encompass various activities pay.

<sup>2</sup> *Panorama de la société 2014*, English version: *Society at a Glance 2014*. This overview offers a comparative approach which makes it possible to target certain criteria and to update the points to be studied in depth on the issue of dropping out. See: [www.oecd.org/els/societyataglance.htm](http://www.oecd.org/els/societyataglance.htm) (consulted on the 13/10/20).

<sup>3</sup> The DGESCO is a national ministerial institute for monitoring schooling and guidance flows in France (Nov 2014, DGESCO, Direction de l'Enseignement Scolaire de l'Éducation Nationale. In English: School Education Directorate of the French Ministry of Education).

<sup>4</sup> The PISA surveys highlight the backwardness of France and the lack of confidence of French students.

<sup>5</sup> This rating emphasizes the close relationship between overall performance and individual performance. This enhances the participation of teachers in the action of the education system as a whole. See: Note d'information n° 38 - décembre 2016 (<https://www.education.gouv.fr/pisa-2018-stabilite-des-resultats-en-comprehension-de-l-ecrit-10976> consulted on the 03/01/21) and Note d'information n° 37 - décembre 2016 (<https://www.education.gouv.fr/evaluation-des-eleves-francais-l-echelle-internationale-41456> consulted on the 03/01/21).

<sup>6</sup> The French collège represents the first three years of secondary education.

<sup>7</sup> Section d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel Adapté. These lessons are aimed specifically at students with special needs identified by the school system. It is the inclusive school (Adapted General and Vocational Education Section): <http://eduscol.education.fr/cid46765/sections-d-enseignement-general-et-professionnel-adapte.html> (consulted on the 13/10/20).

<sup>8</sup> Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle which is a vocational training qualification.

<sup>9</sup> The Centre Éducatif de Formation Professionnelle (CEFP) (Educational Centre for Vocational Training) in Villepreux, which is a boarding school (the hall of residence is located in Yvelines).

<sup>10</sup> This research gives a voice to young people and tries to understand what positive they can create to face this pandemic. See: [www.auf.org/nos-actions/toutes-nos-actions/apprentissages-des-jeunes-et-enfants-malgre-le-confinement-et-contre-le-covid-19/](http://www.auf.org/nos-actions/toutes-nos-actions/apprentissages-des-jeunes-et-enfants-malgre-le-confinement-et-contre-le-covid-19/) (consulted on the 13/10/20).

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