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# Give our Schools Every Chance

## Ten possible transformations

*Open Letter by the  
Collective School Forging New Paths*

## COLLECTIVE SCHOOL FORGING NEW PATHS

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## THE TRIPLE TASK OF THE SCHOOL

The school is on the move, signs are being given by all of the innovating forces that gather and issue appeals, proclamations, petitions for its fundamentals to be redesigned. Taboo subjects tend to crack: teacher training, the perverse effects of grading, the place of error in learning, the philosophical streak to cultivate in children... The institution follows timidly, remains cautious on the grading... does not entirely understand about the philosophy. In view of the school throes, the terrible dropouts, the violence, the desocialization, there is urgent need to understand their profound and complex causes so as to react, cure or prevent with appropriate responses validated by experience.

This has been underlined by the recently published international PISA 2009 assessment. In many countries, particularly in France, the school continues to operate on the basis of a system that is deeply unsuited to the extensive progress in the democratization of education: the possibilities of success of some have as price the failure of others. *“France is the OECD country where the academic deficiency at 15 years is the most important [...], one where the achievement gaps between students have increased the most, and where the impact of social background on student achievement is the highest,”* wrote the Court of Audit in its Report of May 12, 2010. Equal opportunities, fortunate answer for a small number of students, tend to mask the true causes of the national tragedy that is the educational failure and its consequences.

It would certainly be unfair to see only this negative side of things. But given the magnitude of the crisis in education, we want to say that despite all the reforms following one another, but often contradicting each other, and despite the teachers' combative involvement, results are not turning out to be right. The mentioned assessment confirms it. This is urgently prompting the school to undertake a deep re-examination of its aims, values and practices, to better deploy its ability to accomplish its inseparable threefold task: instruct, educate and form self- and co-responsible persons.

Should not the first step be to question the meaning that with all of society it gives to “success”? Our belief is that the school cannot spare itself this questioning of anthropological nature. It is from this direction, focusing on the development of the human, that we have been advocating for years salutary measures of widely

proven educational and pedagogical effectiveness. These primarily qualitative measures have mostly low or no cost. But all in the medium term would result in great savings of money, of violence and suffering, of dysfunctions.

These proposals are ingrained in the great movement of active schools, based on cooperation, which was born in the late nineteenth century, and in an innovative way in the culture resulting from the psychosocial and psychotherapeutic research of the twentieth century. The latter, drawing meaning from personal psychological suffering, as well as from psychopathologies, even from collective barbarities that marked the century, fertilized our understanding of the human being.

Without underestimating the multiplicity and complexity of the factors involved (modes of operation of the school, school period and timetables, parents-school relations... remarkably identified and analyzed in the recent document "*Appel de Bobigny*"), we are here presenting ten measures in a non-exhaustive manner, all of which have been proven. Without claiming to be the panacea for all problems in school, their application could lead to profound effects on the representations as to the values and behaviors it induces, as well as its conception of learning.

The school is "daughter and mother of society", more than it seems to be aware of. Hyper-competition and the "struggle for positions" are manifest common features. We must acknowledge in this regard the educational, ethical and pedagogical attitudes of teachers and principals who, working against the current, fight and innovate in the field, or in some Training Institutions (*Instituts de Formation*). It is not rich initiatives that are lacking but their recognition and generalization. We understand that we are here facing issues where the economic, the social, the cultural, the family and the school intersect. Hopefully, the democratic forces will tackle this "anthropolitical" task head-on, in the words of Edgar Morin.

The ten possible transformations, driven by these forces, would provide real in-depth answers to the problems of violence, authority, and more widely to school unrest. Their application—experiences prove it—is likely to appease the classroom climate, to recover the energy and time lost to get the students' attention. It tends to re-motivate them, to avoid boredom and loss of interest, to prevent being dragged into the spirals of failure the dramatic consequences of which we are aware of, but know too little of the intimate suffering that often marks a lifetime.

It prevents the addition to the social or economic exclusion of school exclusion (leading cause of antisocial excesses) which multiplies their impact.

It should be noted that these ten proposals stem from the intense work of exchanges among various professionals and networks, begun in 2002 within the "Education Commission" of the *Association Interactions Transformation Personnelle/Transformation Sociale*, in conjunction with the *Revue de Psychologie de la Motivation*. The results of the Commission's work (co-directed by Laurence Baranski and Armen Tarpinian) were published in the document "*Ecole: changer de cap. Contributions à une éducation humanisante*<sup>1</sup>" to which each proposal refers. This also applies to the recently created website "School Forging New Paths," where the authors of said document and constructive contributions from France or elsewhere will be found.

Not intended as restrictive, these ten paths of transformation have been recognized as the essential foundation of a school allowing each student to advance towards true maturity.

## TEN POSSIBLE TRANSFORMATIONS...

### *1) Rethink the terms of recruitment and training of teachers*

The conditions of practice in the profession are not what they were when only 10% of students reached the baccalaureate. If academic knowledge remains the essential purpose, it is less and less sufficient to ensure this "new profession." More crucial than ever, this would require that teachers be trained in child and adolescent psychology and, additionally, in the psychology of students and teachers; in the neural, cognitive and emotional foundations of learning. It would also be necessary to:

- Deepen their knowledge of the educational attitudes that stimulate the child's desire to learn and understand in order to reinforce his deep satisfaction of deploying his capabilities; not for the obsession to impress and surpass others, as it may turn back in feelings of self worthlessness and fear of failure. This would encourage them to make a useful return on their own journey as pupils and

- students, and thus to
- Rethink the meaning of success and the hypercompetitive and unjust logic of a system that, as each of us, they have internalized;
  - Integrate into the initial curriculum proven practices of group facilitation, in particular those of group-class;
  - Take into account in recruitment the educational experiences of the students-teachers and their maturity, both relational and intellectual.

## 2) *Formalize teamwork*

The teachers' work in teams, their exchanges in the same class around possible links between their disciplines, and on a daily basis around the problems with a particular student, would release them from a "splendid isolation" that is not without adverse effects. It is desirable that the "Groups of Analysis of Professional Practices" that allow a regular sharing of positive experiences and encountered difficulties do not remain the feat of militant teachers but become the norm. A good step in this direction was seemingly taken after the recent reform of the *lycée* (upper secondary education): the personalized coaching and the exploration classes lead more teachers to work in teams and to be closer to the students' needs.

The generalization of teamwork would lead teachers to incorporate into their practice the teaching methods of cooperation and mutual aid. These act on the child's interpersonal skills and civic sense, helping him to reach a developmental stage where the realization of the interdependence of individuals awakens the "feeling of belonging to humanity." Enriched by these modes of collaborative work, teachers would change their attitude towards the students. More than mere transmitters of knowledge, they would become supports and guides in the learning process. This transformation requires a specific formation for the future teachers.

## 3) *Confer a positive status to the error*

Here the goal is to confer a sensible status to the error in the processes of learning in order to free students from the phobia of fault. "*A mistake is information not a fault,*" writes Daniel Favre<sup>2</sup>. This is really a truly mental and cultural revolution that would move from an intimidating to a stimulating and reassuring pedagogy. A number of teachers are working in this direction, but the archaism of the system remains over determinant. According to the European assessment PISA, young French students are among the most "inhibited" about their ability to express:



“When we have understood in this country that we learn by making mistakes, we will rebuild the school differently,” said Jacques Attali (*Le Monde Education*, November 10, 2010).

#### **4) Transform the methods of evaluation**

Closely linked with the reestablishment of the status of the error, gradually move away from the traditional modes of grading in favor of “formative evaluation practices,” which include proven tools that foster the child’s trust in his abilities, exercising his self-judgment, and releasing him and his family from the dread of grades and rankings. The mutual emulation with its fair play would not be confused with obsessive competition, nor positive combativeness with overbearing aggressiveness. The school, rather than inhibit them, would stimulate the motives and the love of learning.

It should be noted that in Finland, which ranked first in European countries, the grading in the general sense as we understand it is abandoned before starting grade six. In any event, a grading reform cannot lead to lasting positive effects but with a broader ethical and pedagogical reorientation of the school system. We can hope that the teaching world and the policy makers closely scrutinize these positive results<sup>3</sup>.

#### **5) Rethink authority**

The psychosocial education gives other foundations to the problem of authority and the emancipation of the ambivalence between authoritarianism and permissiveness. It establishes the authority at school on four fundamentals:

- a) The **law**, that is to say the general Regulation of the life in the institution;
- b) The **rules of classroom life** established with the students’ participatory involvement, which gives them a sense of responsibility;
- c) The **mutual respect** shown by the “rituals” of politeness, listening, speaking, mutual aid;
- d) The restorative, self-educational **fair punishment**, aimed at providing urgent personalized responses to students in great behavioral difficulty.

An urgent requirement would be to strengthen as necessary the number of social workers, educational carers and school psychologists.

## ***6) Generalize the basic learning by cycles of maturation***

The official instructions of the Framework Act 1989 (“Jospin Act”), with little further action, held that basic learning should be ensured by **cycles of maturation**, not by year of birth. This can avoid the perverse effect of wanting to make advance at the same pace pupils aged 5 and 6, some being born in January and others in December of the same year. It is without doubt a crucial factor of most often ineffective repetitions. It is a common sense observation, on which we have insisted for a long time, as confirmed by a recent study by Julien Grenet, Research Associate at CNRS (*Le Monde*, December 30, 2011).

A first cycle from kindergarten to the start of CE2 would facilitate the temporary formation of level groups allowing in particular to make up for deficits in spoken or written language or arithmetic, which hinder learning. The future of education owes much to what takes place between 5 and 7 years of age, so the threat to repeat the year, with all its stressful effects, must be positively avoided.

## ***7) Integrate the contributions of psychosocial education from nursery school to university***

The psychosocial education, that is to say the methodical integration of self-knowledge and interpersonal interactions in the field of knowledge and social and citizen practices, is a very young legacy—to be fruitful—that our time offers to the culture of the future. Antidote of inhuman, violent, fanatical, sexist and xenophobic behaviors, but also of everyday conflicting interrelations, the psychosocial education aims at developing fundamental human skills: a sense of responsibility, critical thinking and self-criticism, capacity for empathy and dialogue, for relating without domination or alienation to others, for humor, autonomy, cooperation...

To accurately illustrate its ways and practices, we can refer to the “**Program for Schools**,” developed collectively in the context of the French Coalition for the *International Decade for the Promotion of a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World*. (Decade 2001-2010, as resolved by the United Nations in 1998).



This educational program marks out the tracks and provides tools that would be to the advantage of teachers-students.

Among complementary broad-based approaches, which also apply to the school, we may cite *Sociopsychanalyse* by Gérard Mendel (cf. Claire Rueff-Escoubès), the aims of which are to make the institutional practices truly democratic, giving a sense of responsibility; and *Thérapie sociale* by Charles Rojzman which also leads to raise in each of the institutions and individuals who make them up the realization of their co-involvement in the collective well-being or ill-being. Applied to the school, these two approaches have a very powerful impact on student-student and student-adult relations. It should be noted that they are widely used outside France.

## **8) Provide training in non-violent conflict management**

In the field of the psychosocial education, various approaches provide tools for conflict management and mediation, including “peer mediation,” which prevents that living well together be just wishful thinking and makes of it an everyday learning process. The results are promising and the school is a privileged place. The law that would establish a child’s right to non-violence cannot be separated from the “child’s right to education in non-violence.”

What is at stake here is, in the long term, the transition from a **culture of war**, where the minds in all latitudes are immersed, to a **culture of peace** that much remains to be invented. It is vital that we understand where and how the school could better contribute. There lies, in the depths, the anthropological sense of these other paths proposed for the school...

## **9) Teach to learn, to exchange, to “philosophize”**

“We are taught to write, read, count, but we are not taught to learn,” said an 11-year-old student. Practiced by some, this is still a practice not enshrined in official instructions (cf. André Giordan).

The same applies to the socializing methods of “mutual exchange of skills” among students, a source of reciprocal intellectual and practical enrichment. They are expected to develop at the level of adults in “Network Exchanges” and “Networks of Networks” (Claire Héber-Suffrin). These could logically find their place in the Associations of Public Education Institutions (GRETA, for its acronym in French).

In terms of the philosophy “taught” to children, let us call upon the philosopher: *“The child certainly does not have the philosopher’s knowledge nor his ability to theorize. But he shares with him an “amazement at the world” and an “ignorance” that set in motion the desire to understand,*” said Roger-Pol Droit<sup>4</sup>. Formation on self-awareness and awareness of the world, it fits naturally within the scope of application of the psychosocial education that aims at developing human capabilities. It is most often implemented in the way of “speaking workshops” where over a very short time children share their questions.

### *10) Educate in the complexity and spirit of science*

From inter- and transdisciplinary approaches of knowledge resolutely taken into account, the school would open the students’ minds towards the sense of complexity and an ecological view on reality. These approaches would stimulate their desire to understand and learn. So far as to technical applications, they would form them in the scientific spirit and its constructive doubt. (Betting on the students’ needs of questioning and active participation, “*La Main à la Pâte*” (Hands On), reputed practice that deserves to become widespread, is an excellent first path.) The education on complexity would help them become citizens who are better informed and armed for their life choices as well as their political commitments.

We have pointed it out, these ten proposals do not exclude others, humanely formative ones. We could add, among others, the **imaging education**, a young science that is understandably becoming an absolute urgency; the **intercultural education**, which has also become vital in our increasingly mixed-race societies; or even the **education on ecocitizenship**...

## **TOWARDS A COMMON BASE CULTURE**

These qualitative transformations would have on the long term a tendency to diffuse into the social body, to nurture the political behaviors, and to be part in the long run of civic ethics and practices. They would be the vectors of a true “Common Culture” of which the “Knowledge and Skills Base” of the Framework Act

2005 (Fillon Act) marks a step forward, but goes into the field of psychosocial education in very little depth. Often cited as “models,” the Nordic countries, where human success and school success are implicitly linked, and where “every child is important,” obtain the best results on the international scale.

The engagement in these transformations would allow our schools to fully integrate:

- The anthropological and ethical dimension, which calls for an education in which skills, technical skills, social skills and collective social skills are learned together;
- The environmental dimension, which enables a non-simplistic understanding of reality and implies in particular a fair and sensible economic development, as opposed to performance at any price, blind to its consequences<sup>5</sup>.

From this perspective, founder of greater humanity, the “Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future” recommended by Edgar Morin provide essential leads<sup>6</sup>. Montaigne commended “a well-made rather than a well-filled head.” Today we would say “well-made head and well-made heart” or “well-matched Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and Relational Quotient (RQ)...” Neuroscience shows that cognition and emotion are two linked functions that work at full capacity in learning. This should close the sterile opposition between instruction and education.

Neither holding them as absolute models nor hastily copying them, the examples of the Nordic countries show, above all, that profound transformations in the school are a “realizable utopia.” We should note that in Finland this development of the school began nearly forty years ago, and that it has been and continues to be accompanied by the political forces and the society as a whole.

Driven by a deep understanding of the conditions for a fully human success of the school, it is about working on the long term but also, as a matter of urgency, about building informed responses to school unrest. It is to these positive transformations of a school in continuous interactions with the family, social and political life that we have to open paths jointly.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ecole changer de cap. Contributions à une éducation humanisante*, collective work (co-direction A.Tarpinian, L.Baranski, G.Hervé, B. Mattéi), Chronique Sociale, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Favre, *Cessons de démotiver les élèves. 18 clés pour favoriser l'apprentissage*, Dunod, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Robert: *La Finlande: un modèle éducatif pour la France? Les secrets de la réussite*, ESF Editeur, 3rd edition, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Roger-Pol Droit, *Osez parler philo avec vos enfants*, Bayard Centurion, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> *Idées-Forces pour le XXIème siècle*, collective work (dir. ArmenTarpinian), Chronique Sociale, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Edgar Morin, *Les sept Savoirs nécessaires à l'éducation du Futur*, Seuil, 2000.