

# Educational practices and the development of psychosocial skills in children aged 9 to 12 attending alternative schools of the second and third type

Tabatha Carton, Willy Lahaye, Charles Glineur, Zacharie Carton,  
Loic Seran

*To avoid inclusive writing's cumbersome his/her, etc., "her" has been chosen, arbitrarily, as the generic term.*

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the possible effects of pedagogical practices on the development of psychosocial competencies of children attending alternative schools, and more specifically second and third type schools (Collot, 2017). For this purpose, a questionnaire survey was conducted within 4 educational structures, interviewing children and learning facilitators.

## Keywords

psychosocial skills, overall health, alternative pedagogies, type 2 school, Freinet pedagogy, type 3 school, democratic school, educational practice

## Authors

Carton, T., Lahaye, W., Glineur, C., Carton, Z., & Seran, L.: Department of Family Sciences, University of Mons

Contact: [Tabatha.carton@umons.ac.be](mailto:Tabatha.carton@umons.ac.be)

[Willy.Lahaye@umons.ac.be](mailto:Willy.Lahaye@umons.ac.be)

[Charles.Glineur@umons.ac.be](mailto:Charles.Glineur@umons.ac.be)

[Zacharie.carton@gmail.com](mailto:Zacharie.carton@gmail.com)

[Loic.seran@umons.ac.be](mailto:Loic.seran@umons.ac.be)

## 1 Introduction

For several years and is still the case, the development of psychosocial skills (PS) has been one of the WHO's and the Belgian educational system's (Decree "Mission", 1997) major concerns (Lambooy & Guillemont, 2014). Nevertheless, a disparity is observed in the methodology applied the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB) schools. The observation of this heterogeneity casts doubt on the real PSs acquired by young people (Champagne, 2017; Renard et al., 2015). This questioning increases even more as the number of students enrolled in alternative pedagogy schools has grown in recent years (Viaud, 2017). Indeed, this type of institution is known to employ learning methods that would optimally develop psychosocial skills, conducive to well-being and overall health (Mangrulkar et al., 2001). Given the importance of acquiring these skills and their direct impact on the individual and society, finding out whether these specific teaching methods develop them further would make it possible to identify issues for reflection that would help increase more equitable acquisition of these skills among all young people.

## 2 Theoretical framework

PSs, the cornerstone of health promotion, correspond to the skills that enable children, teenagers and adults to deal with various events and situations with others, their culture or their environment, in order to maintain their well-being and overall health (Lambooy et al., 2016; Fortin, 2014; WHO, 1986). These skills can be emotional, social, and cognitive in nature and they interrelate with each other (Lambooy & Guillemont, 2014). The development of PSs results, in particular, from the educational act that, according to Bandura (cited by Fortin, 2014), stems from the observation of others and from the formal education provided by the family and school environments. Thereupon, the approach to the development of these PSs involves, among other things, dissociating the role of the family from the school's action (Fortin, 2014). Indeed, as Manciaux and Tomkiewicz (2000) indicate, the family has a crucial influence on acquiring them. This role can be, on the one hand, beneficial when this environment is conducive to good development and prevention, and on the other hand, harmful when the family home's environmental conditions are not optimal which can lead to the increase of the risk of physical and psychological health problems and therefore not guaranteeing the child's

development and fulfillment (Manciaux & Tomkiewicz, 2000). The school and other socio-affective places frequented by the child then play a decisive role in developing her PSs (Fortin, 2014), and foster increased equity among youths (Reynaud, 2019).

Accordingly, this study focuses on the pedagogical practices implemented within two alternative structures: second type and third type schools (Collot, 2017). According to Perret-Clermont (1980), these structures promote young people's social and emotional development by putting social skills into action. Second type schools, and more specifically in this study, a Freinet establishment, was chosen because this pedagogy proposes opening the school to the world in order to make learning more meaningful (Belleau, 1999). This opening is achieved through five techniques, namely free expression; experimental trial and error; educational techniques based on the pupil being an actor in their learning; cooperation, as well as democratic participation (Connac, 2017; Viaud, 2017a). As for third type schools, and more precisely Democratic Schools, they propose a self-directed education, i.e., the child's freedom of choice (Viaud, 2017b); together with the creation of a self-managed democratic micro-society (Le Menn, 2018) where all educational agents are mobilized and granted equal recognition (Maulini, 2017; Korkmaz & Erden, 2014). The latter are inserted in a community system, itself integrated in a network (Collot, 2017).

### 3 Methodology

This hypothetical-deductive research (Giordano & Jolibert, 2009) focuses on the possible effects linking the development of PSs in 9–12-year-olds and the pedagogy practiced in type 1 (traditional education), 2 (Freinet pedagogy school), and 3 (DS) schools. This is the hypothesis: PSs in 9–12-year-olds are further developed thanks to the specific pedagogical techniques used in alternative schools (Mangrulkar et al., 2001) and their overall functioning (Perret-Clermont, 1980). This study project was conducted via a questionnaire survey of a casual sample (Berthier, 2018) of children and learning facilitators within four settings.

The first questionnaire, intended for children, is a standardized test called: the "Psychosocial Skills Scale for Youth as young as 9 years old" (Simar et al., 2019). Inferential analyses were conducted on the data collected. A second

Table I: Description of the "children" sample

Type of educational structure		Socio-economic index	Population				Age					
			Girls		Boys		Total	9	10	11	12	Mean age
1st type: traditional		16	6	37.5%	10	62.5%	16	-	-	7	9	11.56
2nd type: Freinet		19	9	45%	11	55%	20	-	17	3	-	10.15
3rd type: Democratic	I	HS41	3	25%	9	75%	12	1	4	4	3	10.75
	II	HS1	3	60%	2	5%	5	1	2	1	1	10,6
Total			21	39.6%	32	60.4%	53	2	23	15	13	10.76

questionnaire concerning learning facilitator questionnaires was constructed by taking into consideration the different themes addressed in PS development programs (Graner, 2016; Sandon, 2014) and indicators provided by Gafner (2011). These questions were subjected to thematic analysis in order to methodically process the complex information identified (Quivy & Van Campenhout, 2006). Finally, inferences were made between the results of the inferential analysis regarding PS development and the pedagogical practices implemented within each facility.

## 4 Results

### Children's PSs

First of all, homogeneity tests between the two DSs highlight that the children attending them have similar emotional and social skills, both in terms of emotional recognition ( $\alpha$ : .786); misinterpretation of anger ( $\alpha$ : .521); emotional regulation ( $\alpha$ : .428); ability to help one's neighbor ( $\alpha$ : .063); conflict management skills ( $\alpha$ : 1.000) and asking for help ( $\alpha$ : .057). Regarding cognitive skills, these are developed in an identical way regarding self-regulation abilities ( $\alpha$ : .915). Nevertheless, the children's persistence abilities differed from one institution to the other ( $\alpha$ : .010), with the children attending the first democratic structure having higher persistence abilities than those in the second (Spearman's Rho: -.648). As a result, these two groups were separated in the inter-structure comparison of persistence skills.

Regarding the inter-structure comparisons, they point out that all children similarly developed emotion recognition ( $\alpha$ : .941); emotional regulation ( $\alpha$ : .695); their overall social skills ( $\alpha$ : .107); their abilities to provide help ( $\alpha$ : .165); to ask for help ( $\alpha$ : .493); their self-regulation skills ( $\alpha$ : .060), and their persistence skills ( $\alpha$ : .053), despite age differences between schools. Nonetheless, anger misinterpretation differed between the two structures ( $\alpha$ : .025). Indeed, children in the Freinet school misinterpreted anger more than those in the traditional structure (Spearman's Rho: .451). Conflict management also differs between children in the different structures ( $\alpha$ : .007). In-depth analyses show that children in the DS (Spearman's Rho II and III: .395) and the traditional structure (Spearman's Rho I and II: -.482) manage conflicts better than Freinet school-pupils. Finally, the analysis of global cognitive skills reveals a significant difference between structures ( $\alpha$ : .015). In-depth analyses indicate that children attending the traditional school have more cognitive skills than in the other two settings (Spearman's Rho I and II: -.436; Spearman's Rho I and III: -.430).

### Educational practices specific to school structure

The three alternative schools selected work more on exchanges around emotions than does the traditional school interviewed. These exchanges are organized for children to identify and label their feelings and emotions during verbal sharing moments, or mediation with or without adults, or even during free communication. In addition, one of the DSs offers relaxation workshops aimed at centering children on their bodies' sensations and feelings.

As for social skills, they are addressed in a distinct manner between the different schools. Indeed, third type schools propose a shared horizontal governance where the adult and the child are equal, which induces collaboration between these two types of stakeholders, in order to better manage the structure's functioning. As for the Freinet school, it proposes, through its council, collective class management, as well as the organization of future projects. This structure also practices peer-evaluation in order to increase inter-student dialogue. Additionally, these two types of alternative schools give young people the opportunity to manage their conflicts, with or without adults, through mediation. Finally, the traditional school functions more on collaboration and decision-making during school projects.

Concerning the cognitive skills, these are worked on differently in the various structures. For this reason, the DSs do not practice so-called school-based learning, but autonomous learning. The child is free in her actions and choices. Hence, these are guided according to her own motivation. Following this scheme, they must manage by themselves the different strategies they will have to put in place to adapt to a situation or to their environment. As for the Freinet school, it proposes a project-based learning approach that requires children to manage their time and their work individually and collectively. In addition, there are special moments dedicated to highlighting the strategies used during the projects; to self-assessment and to peer assessment, which are carried out with all the students. Lastly, traditional schools offer students activities broken down into individual and group sequences that allow children to compare their strategies and react to them.

## 5 Discussion

The analysis of the data collected made it possible to identify differences in the acquisition of PSs among children in these three types of facilities. The acquisition of these skills was compared to each type of facility's pedagogical practices, in an attempt to determine the origin of these differences. Emotional recognition and regulation were developed in a similar way among all these young people. This similarity, in terms of emotional recognition, is in keeping with the literature. Indeed, as several authors indicate (Bouchard & Fréchette, 2011; Pons et al., 2004), from the age of 6, children have very good abilities to identify emotions. Nevertheless, even though emotional recognition continues to develop after the age of 8, it is essentially concerned with the enlargement of one's lexical field and the differences in emotion biases (valences) (Simoës-Perlant & Lemerrier, 2018). As for emotional regulation, this complex skill is acquired between the ages of 8 and 11 (Pons, et al., 2004). However, this skill is acquired by all children despite age variability. This observation could be explained by alternative schools' practices in terms of exchanges, which offer regular moments of discussion linked to daily life and not essentially centered on academic learning. In fact, during regular group discussions, children can express their feelings and emotions. This type of method, according to Mouton (2013), fosters the expression and recognition of emotions. It also plays a role during the expression of negative emotions that can, with the help of

this protocol, be managed in a collective manner so that each individual can regulate their emotions and resolve the problematic situation at hand (Mouton, 2013). However, young people in the Freinet school stand out for their misinterpretation of anger. Nonetheless, this finding can be qualified by age variability between groups. Indeed, as Aldridge and Wood (cited by Simoës-Perlant & Lemerrier, 2018) indicate, emotion related to anger is mastered later than emotions of joy and sadness. Emotional recognition is therefore not completely acquired at age 10 and will continue to develop throughout the child's schooling (Simoës-Perlant & Lemerrier, 2018).

Through this approach, it is not possible to determine whether the pedagogy employed, the children's age or the interaction between pedagogy and age induce that difference. Especially since the practices used in the Freinet school mentioned above differ from the prevailing ones in traditional education.

As for skills related to helping others, the ability to ask for help and overall social skills prove to be homogeneously developed among all children in the different educational settings. Several reasons could be responsible for such homogeneity, despite marked age differences between groups of children. In fact, collaborative attitudes develop in children around the age of 5 (Clémont & Demond, 2008) and throughout their childhood, particularly through cooperative play (Bouchard & Fréchette, 2011) and socio-cognitive conflicts (Doise & Mugny, cited by Guidetti, 2009). Educational practices favorable to cooperation and socio-cognitive conflicts are used within the three types of educational structure, notably through the opportunity – to a greater or lesser extent – given children to establish projects collectively. Within these two types of alternative schools, a democratic management system of varying degrees is put in place. According to Bouchard and Fréchette (2011), this encourages the development of social skills related to the construction of a collective identity, a sense of belonging to a group, and individual and collective self-regulation aimed at making each social actor more responsible. In these alternative schools, the child's place enables her to grasp values related to commitment, responsibility, fraternity and peace (Connac, 2019). Ultimately, differences in conflict management are observed within the different groups of children. As it turns out, children attending the Freinet school seem to experience more trouble managing a conflict, unlike those in the other two types of structure. These differences between the two types of alternative schools are difficult to account for. In fact, both types of schools use sympathetic listening

and mediation, with or without an adult, to enable the children to deal with conflict situations and to help them self-regulate. These mediation practices contribute, according to Circular 4550 (2013), to addressing life values, and thus improve relationships quality, living together and each individual's personal growth. Nevertheless, the place of the adult could be at the root of this difference. Indeed, DSs use a horizontal governance, granting, according to Le Menn (2018), similar importance to the child's and the adult's words. Freinet pedagogy also removes authority from the teacher, but as Connac (2017) indicates, leaves the teacher with a curatorial function. These varying degrees of democratic intervention styles encourage the child to make decisions and solve problems (Bouchard & Fréchette, 2011). The children's age and the degree of the democratic intervention style applied within these schools could explain the heterogeneous acquisition of conflict management skills by youths in different educational settings.

Among cognitive skills, self-regulation and persistence abilities are developed homogeneously within the different educational structures, despite age differences between groups. However, children's self-regulation and persistence skills evolve in late childhood and then peak during adolescence (Bouchard & Fréchette, 2011). Children attending alternative schools, who were younger than the control group, thus acquired similar skills – in terms of self-regulation and persistence – to children's competencies in the control group. This homogeneity could be accounted for by the practices related to autonomy and motivation implemented within the different structures. And for good reason, DSs do not practice so-called school-based learning, but rather autonomous learning. This confers on the child greater freedom in her actions and choices, as she is guided by her own motivation. According to this framework, the child must manage by himself the different strategies she will have to set up to adapt to a situation or to her environment. This type of functioning induces recourse to planning, control and regulation capacities enabling the child to act effectively (Kluwe, cited by Bouchard & Fréchette, 2011). As for the Freinet school, it offers project-based learning that requires children to manage their time and work individually and collectively. In addition, special time is set aside for highlighting the strategies implemented during projects and for self-evaluation and peer-evaluation in common with all pupils. In this school, children use, in an autonomous way, the same self-regulation capacities as in the DSs. However, their autonomy of choice is reduced. Nevertheless, the teacher



relies on the verbalization of the mental process used by children. This social feedback affects, according to Zimmerman (1995), the child's sense of self-efficacy. At last, the traditional school proposes pupils to implement activities broken down into individual and collective sequences enabling children to confront their strategies and retroact to them. This school also offers freedom in the management of work time by pupils themselves. As a result, children in this structure have less autonomy in their choices, particularly because these choices are pre-established by the teacher. Yet, as Simonot (2012) points out, increasing children's responsibilities empowers them to make their own choices, which then increases their intrinsic motivation, promoting autonomy, perseverance, and a sense of self-efficacy. The importance of motivation on regulatory acts comes mainly from the notion of volition (Simonot, 2012). Indeed, through his voluntary act, the child organizes her goals, and thereby commits herself to her action. According to Simonot (2012), motivation and volition are therefore determinants of self-regulation. These could therefore explain homogeneity in the development of children's self-regulation and perseverance capacities within the different educational structures, despite their age differences.

It is also important to note the significant difference in terms of persistence between the children in the first and second DSs. In fact, the children attending the first structure seem to have more persistence capacities than do pupils in the second one. This difference could be attributable to the use of stress and emotion management strategies at the former facility. This is because that facility offers children workshops on focusing on body and mind in order to better manage their emotions, feelings and stress. These methods are, according to Anderson et al (2020), beneficial to resilience and persistence.

Finally, children's overall cognitive skills in the control group prove to be more developed than in children in the two types of alternative schools. This finding may be qualified by the age variability in our sample. Indeed, the older the child, the more quickly and efficiently information is processed (Bee & Boyd, 2008). This is because brain maturation in the young, and more precisely frontal lobe development, reaches maturity between the ages of 10 and 13 (Bouchard & Fréchette, 2011).

The analysis of these results compared to the literature enables us to partially confirm our first hypothesis. Indeed, several pedagogical practices that promote the development of PSs have been identified in the Freinet school

and in both Democratic structures. Nevertheless, despite this observation, we cannot positively validate this hypothesis, notably due to the small number of comparison groups.

This immersion in the development of young people's PSs reveals the importance of educational practices and techniques. Indeed, despite age heterogeneity, the acquisition of these skills looks, for the most part, homogeneous between the different structures. This can be explained by an "early" assimilation of most of these skills in children attending alternative facilities. This observation tends to raise questions about educational practices that are too rarely focused on the child's overall development, thus paving the way for the contribution of alternative pedagogies to future adults' development and overall health. We hope these issues will be the subject of new research in years to come, because it seems self-evident that all educational community actors must and will have to address them first and foremost.

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