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INSIDE THE “COCOON” OF SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSES. WHEN AUTONOMY SERVES AS A GOLD STANDARD FOR REORIENTING PUPILS

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Transforming schools in order to make them more inclusive is now on the agenda of most educational systems (UNESCO, 2016).¹ Such a situation obtains in the Canton of Vaud in Switzerland, which is currently undergoing a so-called inclusive reform of its education system by encouraging schools to close special education classes and to include and retain as many pupils as possible in regular classes (DFJC, 2019). This reform involves a reorganization of the *dispositifs* made available to students designated as having special educational needs and thus impacts their schooling. The aforementioned reform also changes the work of special education teachers, who are expected to devote more time to the detection of learning difficulties and to the selection of pupils. My doctoral work (Bovey, 2022) seeks to demonstrate that in order to be reintegrated into a regular classroom, special education pupils have to meet certain academic criteria, but above all, they must prove that they master soft skills such as patience, emotional control, and autonomy. This research focuses on the selection process resorted to by special education teachers to decide which students may go back to a regular classroom and which ones should remain in special education classes or schools. This chapter is specifically dedicated to showing how autonomy is used as a standard and a selection criterion.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section presents the context of the Vaud canton and the organization of schooling for pupils designated as having special education needs. The second section tackles the theoretical framework and the research methodology this chapter is based on. The third section focuses on the “cocoon” image associated with special education classes among most school actors. These classes are said to allow pupils to work without pressure, to learn better in smaller groups, and to be spared the hardships

of academic competition. I will show that since the implementation of the so-called inclusive school reform, the *dispositifs* associated with special education are far from being cocoons, but actually make the pupils face the challenge of selection again. The term “*dispositif*” used in this chapter is meant to include all places or forms of support sharing the common characteristic of having “a capacity to inflect the usual school norm characterized by the simultaneous presence of schoolchildren and of a teacher in the given space of the classroom” (Barrère, 2013, p. 100). The *dispositifs* offer an “alternative” to the usual functioning of the school, by allowing for changes in traditional teaching practices (Kherroubi, 2004) and modifying the teacher’s tasks (Cauterman & Daunay, 2010). Using the example of Sylvain, a pupil who was being considered for placement in a more competitive class, the fourth section discusses the work of preparation done by special education teachers to enable pupils to return to a regular classroom. The pupils’ autonomy proves to be an essential criterion used to assess whether or not they may be reintegrated and forms the basis of the “work of self-transformation” (Darmon, 2016; our translation) which is required of them. The fifth section presents the case of Esmeralda, a pupil bound for a future career in special education, who attempted to defeat the educational prognosis by refusing the school’s authority, so as to undertake vocational training of her own choosing. I shall provide an analysis of the education system’s negative reactions to what could be considered a demonstration of autonomy. Finally, my conclusion will return to the double statutory constraint to which schoolchildren in special education are now subjected and to the hold that such arrangements have on the most vulnerable pupils and young people.

Context: the school system in the Vaud canton

In spite of the agreement signed in 2007 by its 26 cantons to align educational practices, the Swiss federalist system entails cantonal sovereignty over such issues. Differences in curricula, disparities in the vocabulary resorted to, and the manner of counting special education pupils make it difficult to interpret statistics and complicate comparisons between cantons. The choice of the context of the Canton of Vaud² makes for an interesting field of research because it is characterized by a separative and selective³ heritage on the one hand and by the wish to set up an inclusive school system on the other hand, notably through a reform reorganizing the special education system (DFJC, 2019). The Vaud school system thus finds itself at the heart of schooling and guidance issues for the children designated by the institution as having special educational needs. Each school (they total 93 throughout the canton) enjoys some leeway to function and manage its budget, and it may set up its own support and tutoring system for schoolchildren designated as having special educational needs.

In Vaud, schooling is compulsory for 11 years, from the first year of primary school to the 11th year (marking the end of secondary school). At the end of grade 8, students are selected and assigned to one of two tracks depending on their grade point average: the pre-“Gymnase” track⁴ (VP) welcomes the best pupils on the academic level. These students will then be able to study for the *maturité* certificate and then move on to tertiary level studies (university, higher education); the general track (VG) welcomes pupils slated to attend general or business schools or to begin vocational training (called “apprenticeship”⁵). In addition to the regular school system, there are many special educational *dispositifs*: special classes which are administratively linked to schools but where pupils are physically separated, or special schools that take in schoolchildren “whose condition requires special training, particularly because of an illness or a mental, psychic, physical, sensory or instrumental disability”.⁶ There are also many *dispositifs* in place to support pupils within the regular schooling system: “interstitial” *dispositifs* (referring to establishments meant to host schoolchildren on an ad hoc basis for certain subjects) or tutoring *dispositifs* set up in the classroom by special education teachers or integration assistants. Figure 10.1 shows the statistics for pupils placed in a special education programme at the start of the 2019–2020 school year.

Following the international incentive to promote an inclusive education system (Armstrong et al., 2016), the Canton of Vaud, like other regions of the world, has changed the mode of operation of its school system. By virtue of the laws and commitments of the canton, integrative solutions are privileged over separative situations. In fact, in recent years, a large number of special

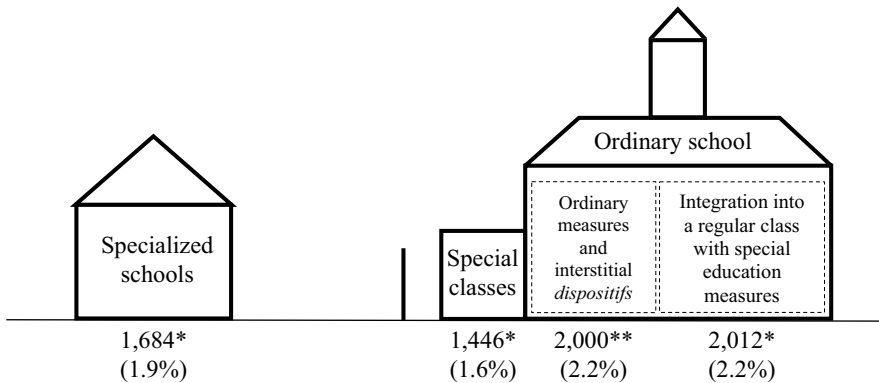


FIGURE 10.1 Percentage of pupils according to the special education system at the start of the 2019–2020 school year (Canton of Vaud – Switzerland).

* Official data from the Department of Education of the Canton de Vaud.

** Estimates based on questionnaires sent to school principals.

education classes have been closed or reorganized to allow as many pupils as possible to return to a regular class with special help.

Theoretical framework and methodology

This chapter is based upon the doctoral research I conducted between 2018 and 2020 amongst special education teachers and schoolchildren in the Canton of Vaud. Adopting an ethnographic approach, I conducted observation sessions and “informal interviews” (Skinner, 2012) over a period of two years in different special education environments (special education classes, special education schools, integration into regular classes, etc.). The objective was to understand how, under the effect of inclusive policies, special education *dispositifs* impacted the pupils’ schooling and reconfigured the professional realm of special education. In addition to those observation sessions, a questionnaire was sent to school principals to identify the measures put in place in the canton; besides, semi-structured interviews with parents, school principals, and special education officials were conducted.

The analysis of this material is based upon the sociology of special education (Tomlinson, 2012) and the sociology of school *dispositifs* targeting the assessment of “organizational in-betweenness” and “institutional fragmentation” (Barrère, 2013, 2014) manifested by the existence of those *dispositifs*. From an interactionist perspective, my work accounts for the different turning points along the pupils’ “moral careers” (Goffman, 1963) by seeking to understand what strategies they mobilize to keep their place and how they experience separation or reintegration. How do pupils understand these transitions? What status changes do schoolchildren experience during their schooling? How do they handle these different statuses (i.e., being a pupil from a special education class and being a “normal” pupil)? What leverage, if any, do they enjoy?

My dissertation also analyses the influence of *dispositifs* on the work of special education teachers and the reshuffling undergone by the profession in recent years: what effects do these *dispositifs* have on interprofessional collaboration? What tasks do special education teachers perform? The analysis of my observations led me to focus on how teachers “shape” their teaching strategies to help pupils and to create a positive “atmosphere” I chose to call a “cocoon”, that is to say, a special and separate space supposed to protect pupils from academic competition.

From the cocoon to getting back to work

The recent reforms of the Vaud school system aiming at a more inclusive education have changed the landscape of the existing educational *dispositifs*, particularly by accelerating the closing of the special education classes that are still in operation. Those classes have a bad reputation; they are perceived by the pupils, the

teachers, and the public as “ghettos” (Oberholzer, 2005) bringing together in one place all the schoolchildren considered to have behavioural or academic problems. The pupils who attend these classes hardly ever reach graduation and are less likely to begin vocational training later on (Eckhart et al., 2011). Paradoxically, special classes are also viewed by teachers and principals as “cocoons” that protect pupils from academic competition and stigmatization. The idea that special classes constitute a protective bubble was and still is widely held by the actors of the field (teachers, specialists, school boards). Thanks to those classes and their limited number of pupils, specialized teachers find the space and time to provide guidance and support to pupils whom they consider to be “mistreated” by the school system, to respect their learning rhythm, to remotivate them, and to restore their self-esteem and self-confidence (Pelgrims, 2003). In all the *dispositifs* I encountered, guidance and individualized tutoring make up an important part of the activity carried out by special education teachers. In my fieldwork, the *care* involved in the work (Tronto, 1998) manifests itself through the significant amount of time devoted to informal discussions about the children’s school experience and private life, and also through linguistic and physical proximity. Special education teachers, for example, touch pupils more than their colleagues do in regular schools, thus overlooking the rules of professional “distance” and disregarding the potential accusations of sexual abuse that have plagued the education profession in recent years (Herman, 2007).

The twofold goal of separating pupils to protect them (the cocoon principle) and maintaining the competitiveness of mainstream classrooms (the separation principle) has been used in many countries to legitimize the implementation of structural differentiation, for much of the 20th century (Winzer, 2009). Following the introduction of inclusive policies in the 2000s, some of the special education classes were transformed into interstitial education *dispositifs* (see Figure 10.1) characterized by a time limit placed on how long pupils may attend these classes (one or two years) to prevent them from being sidelined. Such arrangements are more “porous” in that they allow students to study certain subjects in regular classes in order to facilitate their eventual reintegration. In short, special classes are no longer seen as alternative schooling arrangements in which pupils can spend their entire school years but are designed to serve more as temporary “airlocks” in which pupils await a new placement. These changes, therefore, have a significant impact on the school career of the students. Other special education classes have closed, and children have been reintegrated into regular classes with specialized tutoring.

These changes also have an impact on the way special education teachers support pupils. In addition to the fact that some teachers now work in regular classrooms (with the associated challenges of integration, negotiation, and collaboration) or in more flexible settings, the teachers’ work has changed. A large part of the activity of special education teachers is now devoted to the selection of pupils: since reintegration is conditional, it is their responsibility to

determine who can go back to a regular class and who must enrol in a special education school. Using the information contained in the pupils' "file" (assessments, diagnoses, observations, grades), the special education teachers select the most promising pupils and prepare them, making sure they have a chance to succeed in their temporary placement⁷ in a regular class and eventually stay in it. Far from being a cocoon separate from the norms that apply to the regular classroom, special education *dispositifs* now "test" (Martuccelli, 2006) students by submitting them again to the academic competition from which they had been removed a few months or years earlier.

The case of Sylvain: A facade of autonomy

Special education teachers are responsible for preparing pupils to return to the regular classroom. We shall now turn to this work of preparation. It is indeed possible to understand, through the way in which teachers prepare, drill, coach, and lecture pupils, the stakes that the regular classroom represents for special education teachers. Their concern is to make sure that the students they send to a regular classroom on a try-out period are able to cope and manage on their own. Their reputation is at stake. Special education teachers thus put the pupils back to work and set up new goals for them to succeed in the placement. These "takeovers" (Durler, 2015) interestingly reveal that the expectations of the regular classroom become the norm, including for pupils who have been separated from it and who supposedly should not be subjected to it. In this way, interstitial arrangements constitute a test for pupils who must (once again) prove, at the risk of failing, that they possess the personal "qualities" necessary to attend a regular class. Among the skills worked on and assessed by teachers, we find classic academic skills such as mastering the multiplication tables in mathematics or the basics of conjugation in French. Other behavioural skills are worked on such as the ability to remain calm and to keep silent for a given period of time or to muster persistence when faced with a task. Among these skills, demonstrating that one is capable of carrying out school tasks alone is an important criterion taking up much importance in the teachers' discourse. Autonomy is a central assessment criterion, a "gold standard" to decide of a pupil's new orientation. In several of the classes I observed in the course of my research, the special education teachers sought to develop their pupils' autonomy, a skill most often defined as being able to carry out a required task alone but also being able to "control oneself" on behavioural and emotional levels. Interstitial *dispositif* teachers often reorganize the space and the syllabus to have pupils study in workshops during which they can complete worksheets or activities on their own (the solutions or answers are freely available). A large number of games to be played independently are available in these classrooms. In many of them, there are also devices designed to manage emotions or behaviour, all geared to making students more responsible and helping them gain self-control. The wish

to develop student autonomy can also be traced in the teachers’ discourse. The example that follows is taken from an observation made in a special education class numbering eight pupils experiencing significant academic difficulties (they were described to me by their teacher as suffering either from a language disorder, a personality disorder, or a developmental delay). The pupils were enrolled for a maximum of two years before being redirected to other pedagogical services. One student, Sylvain,⁸ had reached the end of the two-year term in this class and had just learned that he was eligible for a try-out period in another special class with a higher level. This try-out, and the prospect of reintegration into a regular class the following school year, changed the way the teacher talked to him, essentially when it came to the topic of his behaviour in class. The comparison established by the teacher between Sylvain and his peers sheds light on what is expected of students bound for a more integrative system.

The special needs teacher, Ms. Wicht, indicates that she is more or less tolerant with the students. By way of comparison, she shows me another student, Celil, and explains to me: “He is hyperactive and cannot control himself, it is a miracle that he should stay put now, in a moment he might be crawling on the floor. I can’t punish Cecil like him all the time because he has no self-control whereas I have to be much more demanding with Sylvain because he’s going on a try-out placement in another class soon”.

(Excerpt from field diary)

The fact that the teacher adjusts her level of tolerance depending on which student is involved is not an isolated phenomenon. The comparison between Sylvain and Celil is interesting. According to the teacher, Sylvain can (and should) control himself (and is therefore punishable), while Celil cannot. This type of distinction is comparable to what can be observed in other fields, and in particular in socio-educational institutions catering to people with intellectual disabilities. The staff distinguishes between residents who “control” their gestures and those who make inappropriate or violent gestures because of their disability. As far as the latter are concerned, professionals take it upon themselves to hold the disability responsible for their actions. By contrast, residents who are deemed to be responsible for their actions are morally condemned and punished (Bovey & Kuehni, 2019).

On several occasions during the time I spent observing the class, the teacher would rebuke Sylvain for his behaviour: “Sylvain, stop chattering, I can assure you that it won’t be tolerated in the other class”. The remarks also applied to learning: “Sylvain, you have to work alone and concentrate, it’s important when you’re over there”. These remarks sound much like what Héloïse Durler (2015, p. 89) calls “lectures” or “takeovers” by teachers. While these lectures are meant to signify to the pupil that there are differences in expectations and levels between the two classes, they also denote a concern that the pupil may

not be well prepared or adequate during their try-out period, a tell-tale sign that the teacher prepared her pupils poorly. For Ms. Wicht, the challenge is also to demonstrate to sceptical teachers at her school that the reintegration of her pupils is possible. The teacher devised a specific emergency programme for Sylvain: games which, according to her, make it possible to work on autonomy skills and more difficult math exercises. The objective is that he should be able to manage on his own when he is on placement so as not to overburden the teacher hosting him, the risk being that the latter, feeling overburdened by Sylvain's presence, might give negative feedback on the placement and refuse to keep him in his class. It is therefore necessary to make sure that Sylvain will be as discreet as possible. During my fieldwork, several teachers mentioned the fact that moral skills and behaviour are more important than the pupil's academic level.⁹ Ms. Wicht is less concerned about his academic performance than about his attitude in class: "He takes off other children's hats, puts pencils in the hood of their coats, touches the bottom of his classmates". The teacher was worried that Sylvain would stand out.

Thanks to the observation of Sylvain's situation and to other similar situations analysed during my fieldwork, it is possible to make several remarks.

First of all, it should be noted that the deficiencies and weaknesses which had been identified in the pupils' learning abilities earlier in their schooling (lack of autonomy, concentration problems, etc.) and that had tipped the scales in favour of placement in special education structures¹⁰ were resorted to again by the teachers¹¹ as assessment criteria to identify potential "candidates" for reintegration into a regular class. In these situations, "student autonomy is both an objective and a demand, the problem often arising from the inversion of this temporality" (Maulini & Erceylan, 2020, p. 2). When it is thus prescribed and worked on in an urgent manner by special education teachers, autonomy serves more as an evaluation tool for selection than as a learning objective.

Secondly, autonomy is reduced to its narrowest definition here: it amounts to ensuring that students remain quiet and do not demand that teachers pay attention to them. The goal is to "fit in" during the try-out period without disturbing anyone. The teachers accept pupils who face challenges, but above all they want them to be "quiet". This figure of the "ideal client" (Becker, 1952) raises questions about how to support reintegrated pupils, what teachers expect of them, and the "ghost" role they would like them to play. The autonomy demanded of pupils serves only short-term interests, amounting to a facade of autonomy that seems very far removed from the objectives of freedom of action and emancipation that a more global autonomy or the development of social and political skills (or *agency*) would ensure. We see that the work involved to develop student autonomy is meant to fulfil the objective of maintaining school order through mechanisms labelled "work on the self" (Giuliani, 2020).

Despite the school’s inclusive intentions, we observe that the teachers seek above all to transform pupils so that they can adapt and strive in a reintegration situation, not to transform the environment (which is the cornerstone of the inclusive school system, cf. Armstrong et al., 2016) to allow for the inclusion of students who do not correspond to school norms. It is therefore (always) up to the students to adapt in order to meet the standards of the regular class. The work involved to prepare the students can be read as “make-up” work. Because they are drilled to keep quiet, then the conception of autonomy here appears to be superficial and akin to the fabrication of a “sham” pupil meant to hide their true “nature” or identity. This “fraud” gives the impression that the special education teachers are concealing the true nature of their pupils, as one would conceal the origin of a stolen car. The ability to put on this facade is said to be a way for special education teachers to get their pupils across the line separating the special education classroom from the regular one and to ensure that the regular teachers they send their pupils to on placement do not spot the “deception” entailed. During another field research, a special education teacher talked about the relief she felt when the regular teacher assessed the placement of one of her pupils (described as hyperactive and unpredictable); she expressed her surprise, saying that “one couldn’t tell he was a special education student”. Boundary crossing had been successful.

Is it possible for pupils to escape this selection process? Do they enjoy any leeway? The following field diary excerpt partly answers these questions based on the situation of one pupil, Esmeralda, who tried to outsmart the school prognosis and “go it alone”.

The example of Esmeralda: The irony of autonomy

I meet Esmeralda in October 2019; she attends a “lieu Ressource” (dispositif in which students, alone or in pairs, leave the regular classroom to attend French or math classes with a special education teacher). She tells me about her background. Esmeralda was born in Portugal and arrived in Switzerland at the age of nine, without speaking any French. She went to intensive French classes for the first two years, but then difficulties in oral comprehension were detected. Esmeralda attended speech therapy for one year (when in 7th grade). Due to her academic difficulties and poor grades, she received specialized tutoring from the 9th grade onward. She tells me that it was complicated for her parents to accept the assistance of a special education teacher, “they wanted me to be normal”. After high school, she would like to be a hairdresser (she was convinced by a traineeship at a hairdresser’s) but would rather become a medical assistant.

At recess, her special education teacher, Ms. Chappuis, completes her profile with more information. According to the education department official who “panicked” when she saw Esmeralda’s report card (according

to her file, she suffers from a “massive” language disorder also called dysphasia), she should have been referred to a special institution or received 100% specialized teaching. Ms. Chappuis insisted that she remain in the regular classroom with tutoring. As there was no room in the institution anyway, she was placed on the waiting list. A game of “ping-pong” to establish a diagnosis ensued between the psychologists and the speech therapists; they lost a great deal of time trying to detect her language “disorders”. With this in mind, the teacher requested that the school grant her an extension to give her a chance to catch up. According to everyone at the school (teachers, administration, school counsellor), Esmeralda will continue her post-compulsory education in transitional dispositifs for young people with difficulties, such as supervised training in sheltered workshops. At school, all are thus waiting for her to finish her education. However, Esmeralda would like to be a medical assistant (this, according to her teacher, makes the teachers and the guidance counselor smile, because “no one would bet anything on her”).

In the spring of 2020, Ms. Chappuis contacted me again and told me that Esmeralda, without telling anyone, was likely to have landed an apprenticeship as a pharmacy assistant. During a traineeship there, the pharmacist found that she understood things and learned very quickly. On the manager’s advice, she contacted the vocational officer¹² about her problems at school and her poor results. The commissioner told her that they would arrange to get funding from the disability insurance company so that she could complete her training.

(Excerpt from field diary)

Due to the school’s passivity and defeatist discourse, Esmeralda adopted a strategy of reappropriation of her life (Goffman, 1968) by ignoring the school’s predictions that she was slated to fail. By doing so, she showed that she no longer expected anything from school and that she could manage on her own. This type of strategy (using one’s network, taking personal steps, asking for help) is more common in families endowed with more cultural capital (Ruiz & Goastellec, 2016) and is less common among pupils who find themselves at the end of their schooling stint in special education. According to Ms. Chappuis, the teachers, deans, and specialists were all surprised to learn that Esmeralda had taken those steps on her own. When the dean learned of Esmeralda’s training plans, she smiled and told Ms. Chappuis that she would be no more than “a nice green plant in the pharmacy”.¹³ The surprise of the school protagonists was due to the pupil’s supposedly poor cognitive and organizational abilities (she was diagnosed with massive dysphasia and doomed to remain in a specialized institution), and also caused by questions of legitimacy and by the daring that the pupil had demonstrated in asking by herself, without the school’s approval, for support from various authorities (disability insurance, vocational officer) and for applying in a company (the pharmacy) which was not previously

known to her. In this way, she thwarted all predictions about her (Delay, 2020): a girl of foreign origin, from a working-class family and in a special education *dispositif* does not take such initiatives.

The surprise (and cynicism) of the school protagonists in the face of Esmeralda’s endeavour are interesting. The reaction betrays a certain paradox on the part of the school in its propensity to assess (and sanction) students on the criterion of autonomy, to make it a central reference in the education of students, as well as a sign of deviance (see Merl in this book) and at the same time to find surprising and even illegitimate the very actions revealing the qualities that the school expects from its students: responsibility, resilience, tenacity, maturity, projection into the future, motivation and a great deal of autonomy.

In the end, Esmeralda’s “heroic” commitment did not have a positive outcome. I met her again a few weeks later. She told me that a few days before signing the apprenticeship contract, her employers (in the pharmacy) feared that she would not pass the theoretical courses and fail her first year. She then enrolled in a transitional *dispositif* meant to ease her into the professional world. In view of her “school record” (Payet, 1995), she was placed in a special class where special education teachers reinforced her basic skills and where vocational counsellors helped her find an apprenticeship and coached her to draw up a “realistic” career plan (Delay, 2020).

In the light of Esmeralda’s situation, it seems difficult for students to escape the grip and control exercised by the school institution through such mechanisms. This story reveals institutional procedures that may be described as insidious, straddling both a “tragic” and “ironic” side, so much so that “the education deployed by public institutions would continue to rhyme with domination” (Laforgue, 2019).

Conclusion: School control and the dual constraint of special education

This chapter highlights the effects that an inclusive school reform may have on special education pupils when it comes to reintegrating them into mainstream schooling. Such reintegration is not a given; it is conditioned by the acquisition of academic skills and, above all, behavioural ones. The status of these students reveals a double constraint: they have, because of their diagnosis and their school career, the status of “handicapped” pupil with its attendant social stigmas, and at the same time, they are forced to play the role of normal pupils by being subjected to the norms of the ordinary class. This situation constitutes a twofold challenge for special education students, as was the case for Sylvain and Esmeralda.

This new phenomenon consisting in selecting pupils in special education environments involves the formal or informal setting up of objectives to determine who can study in a regular class and who cannot. This selection system highlights an important paradox: while the school seeks to make students

autonomous, it is not ready to “let go” of them. We have seen with the story of Esmeralda that the school is not prepared to deal with a special education student going it alone and taking responsibility for her own destiny. Her demonstration of autonomy was considered to be illegitimate by the school institution. In recent years, the introduction of tutoring strategies and tools for monitoring pupils (such as case management or individual coaching) has largely permeated school policies. Although this support strategy allows political authorities to leave no young person without a solution – an honourable policy if ever there was one – it has become very difficult for children and young people to forgo the monitoring of their decisions. There are many other ways for young people and families to do things independently from institutions and to bypass school policies. Some parents endowed with a certain amount of social and financial capital decide to take their children out of regular schools and put them in private schools.¹⁴ Other families mobilize their “network” of acquaintances to find alternative paths to professional training, and still others decide to return to their country of origin in the face of academic failure and the narrowing down of possibilities.

We saw in Sylvain’s situation that although the required autonomy could be qualified as a “facade”, it appeared to be a determining and normative criterion for the continuation of his school career. We also saw in Esmeralda’s situation that the injunctions to autonomy were paradoxically counterbalanced by a permanent control and monitoring of the students and young people that can be described as the “hold” of the systems and institutions. This control over individuals – which goes beyond the perimeter of the school – led some sociologists to use the term “total institution” used by Erving Goffman (1961) to highlight the restriction of freedom and the hold that institutions exercise over individuals. Such is the case, for example, of sociologist Hugo Dupont (2021) who noted a recent reconfiguration in the way children and young people with disabilities are supported by institutions. He proposes the term “total support” to qualify a

new institutional form that has managed to preserve its normative ambition. The word “support” allows us to acknowledge the change in institutional form by taking into account the fact that social concern for vulnerable people has led to individualized support, along with a form of horizontalization due to the breakdown of the services dedicated to them.

(p. 190)

Thus, the following observation is increasingly valid: the most vulnerable pupils and young people on the academic and social level are sooner or later reclaimed by the institutions through new coaching *dispositifs* (Oller, 2020) or professional and social integration *dispositifs* in which special education teachers, social workers, and coaches “(re)teach” them to develop a realistic life project and to take responsibility for their own lives: their autonomy is in safe custody.

Notes

- 1 This chapter, including the original citations in French, was translated by Elisabeth Lamothe.
- 2 The canton of Vaud is a French-speaking canton with 90,582 students at the start of the 2019–2020 school year for a general population of 815,300. Both in terms of size and number of inhabitants, the Canton of Vaud is one of the largest in Switzerland.
- 3 The Canton of Vaud has long been amongst those practicing early student selection into separate study tracks (in 2000, 6% of the pupils were enrolled in a special class or institution). It also practices early selection at the age of 11–12 by directing students into separate study courses at the beginning of compulsory secondary school.
- 4 *Gymnase* corresponds to the upper secondary school level (15–18 years old). It is the equivalent of the *Lycée* in France, the American High School or the end of the Secondary School in the UK.
- 5 In Switzerland, a large proportion of young people (nearly two-thirds) enrol in a vocational training program called “*apprentissage*” (apprenticeship) after completing compulsory school. Apprentices are employed for two or three years by a private company or institution and are trained by apprenticeship instructors while taking classes at a vocational school.
- 6 <https://www.vd.ch/themes/formation/pedagogie-specialisee/institutions-et-ecoles-specialisees/>.
- 7 The schoolchildren who are being considered for placement in a regular classroom usually spend a week or two in a class where there is a place for them and, if possible, where the teacher is willing to have them and is supportive (special education teachers often keep an informal list of classes where they can place students and where they cannot). At the end of the stint, the host teacher produces his assessment of the experience and gives prior notice as to whether or not the student should be reintegrated.
- 8 All names are pseudonyms.
- 9 French sociologist Hugo Dupont (2021) observed the same phenomena when conducting research and noted the existence of similar selection criteria: “Behavior, concentration, autonomy and sociability are scrutinized and become the criteria used to assess the legitimacy of the pupil’s presence in class, [...] with academic level ranking second only” (p. 134).
- 10 These orientation criteria are described in the literature, e.g., Gremion-Bucher, 2012.
- 11 In the case of some hyperactive pupils, medication becomes a crucial issue in order to avoid crisis situations or excitement, especially during the placement. On two occasions in my fieldwork, special education teachers called the parents of pupils diagnosed with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) to ensure that they would take their medication before and during the placement.
- 12 For each training period, there is a professional commissioner (a professional in the trade) responsible for monitoring the training given to apprentices and the working conditions in the companies.
- 13 The dean made a pun on two French expressions based on the word “plant”. She refers to Esmeralda as both a “*belle plante*”, i.e., a beautiful girl, and a “*plante verte*” (green plant), which is another French expression referring to an idle, useless person who is at most a decorative “item”. Special education students are sometimes referred to in this way. For example, in one school I visited during my research, a special class was informally referred to by the teachers as “*la classe des plantes vertes*” (the class for green plants) or “*la classe des légumes*” (the class for vegetables) in reference to the students’ presumed low intellectual potential.

- 14 The Canton of Vaud is characterized by the high rate of students enrolled in private schools (7.7% for the canton of Vaud in 2020 compared to an average of 4.6% for Switzerland at large). Such numbers are conditioned by the existence of a significant number of international schools and private boarding schools. Nevertheless, the rate of enrolment in private schools remains relatively marginal compared to other countries (for example, the European Union average is 15%).

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