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ILLITERACY: CAUSES, ISSUES AND PREVENTIVE MEASURES

> **A few measures**

Every three years, under the aegis of the OECD, (*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*), the PISA¹ international assessment measures and compares the skills of 15-year-olds in the three following fields: "Reading comprehension", "Mathematical culture" or "Scientific culture". PISA aims at the students who are finishing compulsory schooling in most OECD countries, regardless of their educational background or their future plans (further studies, or starting to work): in France, they are mainly students of "seconde générale et technologique" (10th grade in the U.S, year 11 in the U.K) and "3^{ème}" (9th grade in the U.S, year 10 in the U.K). Students are not assessed on their knowledge in itself, but on their ability to appeal to their knowledge and use it in different situations. PISA's "reading comprehension" is the ability to understand and use written texts but also to think about what they mean. This definition goes beyond simple decoding and literal comprehension. It involves the comprehension and the use of the written word but also the questions about the meaning, for different purposes. In 2015, as in 2009, France is just in the average key OECD countries. The Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries generally score above the OECD average, while the Eastern and Southern European countries are less successful. Finland, as in 2014, has the best results. In France, the worst performing students account for 8.3% of all students, compared to 4.2% in 2000. Even more worrying is the percentage of children who are resilient (students performing well despite a social and economic handicap) which is 8% in

¹ PISA : Programme for International Student Assessment. Further information available on <http://www.pisa.oecd.org>

France, whereas it reaches 15% in Korea, 14% in Finland and over 12% in many countries that spend less money on education than we do. That is why it will be a long and difficult way to reach the level of these nations, far more concerned than we are about the fate of their less fortunate children.

Since 1990, reading and writing performances of over 400,000 young French people aged 17 to 18 have been evaluated by the Ministry of Defense. They have observed that over a period of 25 years, more than 10% of these young people, a majority of whom were still at school, have serious difficulties in understanding a simple narrative or technical text; they fail the simplest writing tasks. In 2016, 12% of young French people aged 17 to 18 were struggling with reading and writing. Among them, 6% are in very serious difficulty, that is to say very seriously handicapped in the social and professional life. This represents more than 65,000 young people who come out of our school system each year with serious reading difficulties, a very poor ability to put their thoughts into written words and often hardships in mastering explanation and argumentation. At different levels, they are all linguistically insecure; that is to say, they have established throughout their learning so many misunderstandings between oral and written language that reading, writing and speech constitute for them risky activities, painful and feared trials. They constitute a large mass of illiterate people who will not be able to read a newspaper article, understand the details of a summons or an administrative document, follow instructions or even use a map or a grid. Their reading difficulties are edging them out and make their participation in training or insertion actions very uncertain.

If people with illiteracy represent about 10% of the population, the "low-readers", unable to read and understand a text of several pages, are likely to be around 30%. This population will never open a book and will be excluded from our cultural heritage. Then it is necessary for schools to give opportunities and means to all its students and... strength to face THE DISTANCE

Chart: Amount of reading performances among the beneficiaries of the minimal solidarity revenue (RSA), detainees and young people aged 17 to 18.

Categories of readers and non-readers	RSA 2014 *	Detainees in remand centres 2015	Young people aged to 17 to 18
People unable to recognize a word Illiteracy (analphabetism)	12 %	6 %	1 %
People able to identify isolated words	12 %	9 %	5 %
People able to understand simple sentences Illiteracy	16 %	8 %	6 %
People unable to understand long texts (more than 5 pages) Little-readers	25 %	27 %	22 %
Hardy and skillful readers	35 %	48 %	66 %

I - A damaged age group

A - Social exclusion

Among young people, illiteracy is less important but much more disadvantageous. Unlike their elders, young people have a harder time getting their first professional experience. In general, their difficulties in writing made them leave school at around 17 years old and there is a real risk of "settling" into a period of wandering that can last several years. During this period, nothing seems to boost their future integration into the world of work. Today, the community aid project for young people and the information and orientation centers² are struggling to reach young people under the age of 20 who have left the school system and are concentrating on those who, for

² Supporting networks for integration of young people

example, have known until now 5 years of wandering, and "finally" feel the need to be helped. In fact, these periods provoke the evanescence of knowledge, increase the difficulties and reinforce the distance from the written word. Other data from the survey on the prison population confirm the trends that have been considered so far. Indeed, they show that the number of young people with poor reading performances was important in remand schools. Among the 3 lowest categories, 55% were young people under 30 (27% were between 30 and 39 years old). What we can see in reading performances is confirmed by the data obtained on school levels and diplomas: 71% of young inmates (between 21 and 24 years old) had no diploma whereas the national average of young people uneducated men accounted for only 30% of this same age group. These observations support the hypothesis of a shift towards a society that sidelines young people who do not master reading and writing enough.

The reading performances assessment of populations strongly marked by exclusion gives information about the social vulnerability that illiteracy seems to imply. In 2012, a survey about the beneficiaries of the RSA showed there was a very strong representation of people with reading difficulties. The survey was conducted over one year and concerned 13 metropolitan French departments. The sample (1009 people) included 12% of people who were totally unable to read (illiterate), and 54% of people experiencing difficulties of various kinds.

B - Lack of autonomy and social precariousness

Illiteracy is not synonymous with exclusion, but it certainly leads to a lack of independence. Two kinds of dependence can be distinguished: the first is related to the difficulty of performing specific acts of reading and writing; the second is related to the inability to deal with information in a coherent way. Writing a letter to a parent, reading a letter or answering the teacher only require the temporary help of a reader / writer, and a specific administrative task can be left with relatives. However, asserting one's social rights, solving a problem of inheritance, facing a divorce or a situation of indebtedness or exclusion from a home, cannot always be satisfied with the support of a close person, capable of reading and writing. Because they cannot be managed in

their complexity, these situations can get worse quickly and lead to irreversible disasters.

C - Illiteracy increases the time of exclusion

In the RSA beneficiary survey, one statistic showed that illiteracy increased the time of the exclusion. The study of reading performances based on the date of RSA registration showed that people with weak performances came out from it with difficulties. Among the people who had more difficulties than others, 49% had been in the RSA for at least three years. So the system holds back the people who struggle the most in writing for a long time and it is just a crossing point for others. This hypothesis with heavy consequences has to be confirmed; however, the statistics about the description of the RSA population seem to agree with the fact that people with a very low level of schooling are highly represented: 42.5% of RSA beneficiaries had lower levels at the end of secondary school; 20.1% had a level over the end of secondary school or had unfinished professional training.

Other statistics on a population affected by exclusion are given by the system of tracking illiteracy at the entry of prisons (2014). This allowed, according to the same principles of assessment, to describe the reading performances of "new inmates". This survey, which concerned only French speakers, shows that reading difficulties affected a very important part of the population of new inmates: the number of illiterates in the prisons was six times higher than among the conscripts; twice as many people with difficulty reading words; twice as many people who at best understood only simple sentences. It should be added that the recidivism rate is correlated with the seriousness of reading and writing difficulties. If illiteracy does not necessarily lead to prison, if it does not automatically provoke unemployment and precariousness, it makes those who suffer from it more vulnerable in their social life. It often goes with detention and misery and makes it more difficult to cope.

II - The particular fate of girls

Year after year, the gap between girls and boys has grown steadily: girls read better and more, write more accurately and more correctly. At the age of 17, the difference is more than 5 points (9.2% of girls and 15.1% of boys) between young men and women

with illiteracy. When we consider the group of young people who are the most in difficulty (close to illiteracy), we discover 80% of boys. But beyond school performances, it is the intellectual stance in response to the school cultural offers that clearly distinguishes girls from boys.

A - The hope of freedom, independence and dignity at school

In girls' mind, school's promises are still acceptable. Of course, they are not deceived about the "social lift": "Well, I know that I will not go up the ladder with my 'professional baccalaureate'. At least, I'll be happy if I get a job at the supermarket. That way, nobody's telling me what to do. I go out, I don't, I sleep, I don't, I read, I don't (!) it's my problem." But despite everything, many of them put their hopes of freedom, independence and dignity in the "school of the Republic". In their opinion, a bet on education deserves to be attempted. (The survey "ni putes ni soumises" neither whores nor submissives, 2010).

As for boys, they start the process of "school divorce" very early. The school is very quickly perceived as a series of arbitrary constraints that are difficult to bear. They are therefore huddled behind a cultural divide that the school has more and more trouble getting them to cross. They have neither the means nor, above all - and this is what worries me - the taste of it ... They are gradually transforming this dividing line into a line of defense in a school territory, in which the rules, the customs and the signs themselves have gradually changed.

B. The implicit laws of the tribe

The respect that girls give more easily to school, their lasting consideration for the intellectual activities of reading and writing, the fact that they are more sincerely open minded to common cultural values, all this makes them suspects of collaboration and venality.

In short, femininity and intellectuality are very soon the target of the same contempt. Virility would identify with ignorance and tribal isolation. The girls in our country - especially those with an "immigrant background" - are thus involved in a fight that is

not really theirs. They are forced to choose their cultural side whereas for most of them, the main question is to be able to exercise their free will, in an intellectual and physical way. Called for an ethnic solidarity and to a religious communitarianism of which they know that they threaten in fact their independence to think and to act like emancipated beings, many are doomed to a contraband schooling: they must deal as close as possible to the implicit rules of the tribe and at the same time avoiding both being a permanent school dropout and being too successful which could cause trouble. One cannot be satisfied with a school, certainly unveiled, that does not give girls the security of liberated learning. The state school system cannot just present a clean and neat appearance. It is a school where the weakest and most fragile are welcomed and protected; the one where girls who want to combine a love for learning and to reach freedom must be able to succeed with as much ostentation as they wish.

III - The corridor of illiteracy passes through our school

When they start secondary school today, 12 to 15% of the children are in serious difficulty for reading; it means that one in ten secondary school students will certainly be in important school failure; in the longer term, it is the promise of cultural and social exclusion for one in ten citizens. This means that each class in secondary school will have an average of five students unable to be independent and skillful. Suddenly left on their own in the fragmented structure of the school, these students will sink, year after year, in the long row of illiteracy. They will survive for four or five years without benefiting from their studies; the institution will move them up because of loss or profit. Primary school kept them alive without really getting them back on track; secondary school finishes them. There is a sort of scandal there.

In rare cases, we will give them a more or less adapted support, we will consider some new solutions; but who can think that a child, when he is 13, still stumbles on simple words, does not master a basic syntax and does not take advantage of an elementary text, will be able when he is "older", to understand a letter ordering family allowances or completing the observation sheet that his employer (if he has one) is asking for. Out of 100 pupils in difficulty in "6ème" (6th grade in the U.S, year 7 in the U.K), 94% still have difficulty in "3ème". They will not pass their secondary school certificate at a

time when the “baccalaureate” no longer guarantees anything. A minority of them, more skillful in practical fields, will obtain a CAP³ because in the end, and despite notorious insufficiencies in the general subjects, we will consider that, all in all, they deserve it. But - and this is essential - this CAP or BEP so hard to get, *they will have won it by default*. They will have been orientated towards these sectors not because they wanted to excel in a job but because they were told they were only good for that. As long as we accept that the row of illiteracy leads to technical and vocational education, we will mark it with shame and frustration.

A - A catastrophic accumulation of failings

Thus more than 10% of our children take the long corridor of illiteracy which, from kindergarten to “3ème”, crosses the school of the Republic. They have always been late on the skills displayed. They suffered from a lack and rigidity of language at five years old; they acquired some skills in decoding words at the age of eight when it was necessary to understand simple texts; they found it difficult to pinpoint occasional information at the age of twelve when they were expected to be autonomous and versatile readers. They failed once and it never stopped. 6 out of 100 children go to school for more than 10 years and do not understand a short and simple text; 6 others are condemned to a surface reading not opening at any distance, no criticism. When they leave this corridor where they have only learned frustration, resentment and alienation, they are promised to ghetto and linguistic isolation. They are forced to give up the power of the human being to transform others, and the world, by the peaceful exercise of the oral or written language. From the last year of nursery school to the age of 18, the numbers are steady and frightening. All students in difficulty in kindergarten are obviously not supposed to experience illiteracy; but the more we progress in this corridor that runs through our school, the more the exit doors are scarce, the bigger is the consciousness of failure, the heavier is a discouragement that will engender revolt and violence.

B – From a school designed to educate a small number...

³ CAP : certificat d’aptitude professionnel, diplôme professionnel élémentaire qu’on passe à l’âge de 15 ans. (certificate of professional ability, elementary professional diploma students take at the age of 15)

We have not paid enough attention to the tremendous changes experienced by our school over the last forty years. Until the sixties, the entrance examination in “6ème” opened the doors of secondary school - and for some of the high school - only to less than a quarter of a class of age. Some went directly into the end-of-study class leading to the mythical Certificate; the others were "introduced" to the certificate, which severely sorted the candidates out.

In forty years, we have suddenly gone from a situation where 3 out of 4 students did not go to secondary school, to the one where all students enter today and stay there for at least five years. It is understandable that such a revolution has profoundly and suddenly transformed the social and cultural composition of the school population. In the past, the selection was such that teachers were guaranteed to "deliver" almost homogeneous classes or at least reasonably heterogeneous. This relative homogeneity was not simply social; it was because the majority of students shared a certain idea of the school and accepted the need to come. The school was then considered as a particular place; we behaved in a particular way. We accepted the rules, we respected the rituals because of fear rather than pleasure, but without exasperation.

In short, there were a few pupils who entered secondary school with the expected basic knowledge. Add to this that the difficulty of the entrance exam which imposed a very strong constraint on primary school program. There was a common culture that was certainly quite stereotyped and rigid, but it was a basis on which one could rely solidly.

C - ... to a school forced to educate the large number

When the barrier rose of an unjust and cruel selection - and it was happily – Many children who were removed and carefully protected until then, were now precipitated in the system. The cultural and social filter was removed and the school was challenged to teach less and less "educated" children: from the school they were given disordered and sometimes negative representations; they had acquired only a very approximate mastery of language; as cultural landmarks, very quickly they had only the gloomy lighting of a television more and more feeble; as for family mediation,

they often only knew silence, indifference and sometimes violence. Year after year, these "new pupils" have caused a problem to a rigid school system, and this problem has become more and more serious and is threatening the system's integrity today.

When it was decided to open the doors of the school broadly to all the children of this country, at the same time it was agreed to receive them all as they were; those coming from poor social categories but also more and more numerous "from elsewhere", in unstable cultural and religious balance. But that certainly could not be done in a school that was previously designed to accommodate sorted privileged people. It would have been necessary for this school to be deeply transformed in its contents, its pedagogy, the training of its masters and its professional purposes. It actually remained almost identical. Even if it tried by inventing new pathways that were in fact only roads to nowhere, it maintained principles of another age that it wanted immutable.

If it succeeded in making it accessible to the masses, it completely missed its democratization. We wanted to believe, and make people believe, that the school had the power to bring these students from elsewhere to its way of working, without really changing its habits and its means of action and this obviously did not work. The result has been the formation of school ghettos, relegation zones and the existence of the shameful corridors of illiteracy that cross our school. If today, a real cultural gap fractures and perverts our school, it is because no politician has so far dared to sacrifice the comfort of a constantly renewed status quo for the unpopular, serious, but needed reforms.

IV - Linguistic insecurity

Every year, more than 60 000 young French men and women leave our school system with serious reading difficulties, a very poor ability to put their thoughts in written words and often a very limited mastery of explanation and argument.

At different levels, they are all linguistically insecure; that is to say, they have established throughout their learning so many misunderstandings between oral and written language that reading, writing and speech constitute for them risky activities, painful and feared trials.

A - Defeat of language, defeat of thought

In other words, more than one in ten young French people, after at least twelve years in school, find themselves in a situation of global linguistic insecurity that seriously darkens their cultural and professional horizons. And those who are not gifted for Literature and Grammar will not necessarily be good in Mathematics, in Biology or even in Computer Science. No! They will not be good at all, because they will be unable to put their own words on a knowledge that will forever remain that of others.

And it is a lie to say that if they fail to become teachers or senior executives, they will make excellent plumbers or skillful mechanics. No chance! Because every job today, even the most manual, requires a solid mastery of oral and written language. School failure, social wandering, that is the result of the inability to put into words one's thoughts precisely and to receive that of the Other with the adapted level. For all these young men and women, the defeat of language is also the defeat of thought; it is the duty to give up acting peacefully and effectively on the world.

Let us not be misunderstood! I do not plead for servile obedience to an immutable standard; I do not deplore the lost purity of a language that any change would pervert. To denounce linguistic insecurity is not to stigmatize spelling and grammatical mistakes by mentioning a dreamed time when, after passing the primary school certificate, we no longer make mistakes; but in the field of education, nostalgia is always bad counselor. What we need to demand from today's school is that the majority of students can have enough precise words, enough effective grammatical structures and enough organized forms of argumentation to express their thought as close to their intentions as possible and to welcome others with great coherence and attention.

To spend more than twelve years in school and not be able to master what determines our ability to live together, what defines the most precisely our human specificity, such is the unfair fate suffered by these children, who are also ours. Understanding what leads them to linguistic insecurity requires that we do not throw ourselves in the pursuit of scapegoats because in this case the responsibility is collective: it is yours, it

is mine. On the contrary, we need to be clearly coherent in order to analyze without indulgence but also without prejudice how misunderstandings are formed and how tears occur.

B - From the urban ghetto to the linguistic ghetto

For more than thirty years, we have accepted - and sometimes blindly encouraged - the gathering in isolated places, of populations that had in common to be poor and for the majority to come from a different, faded and confused place. They came together in these increasingly isolated territories, not for what they shared in terms of explicit inheritance and transmitted history, but rather because, year after year, they knew less and less who they were, where they came from and where they were going.

These suburbs, gradually abandoned, have become ghettos in which social ties are very loose and solidarity almost non-existent. This distinguishes them from London neighborhoods, which are based on a true linguistic, cultural and economic community. The bus driver in a turban whose dress does not shock his passengers lives in a neighborhood where we speak Hindi, where we eat Indian, where we have faithfully preserved lifestyles and beliefs. We chose to live there and start a family there. When we come out for professional, administrative or other needs, we have the means to confront the larger society, and we have the linguistic power to play our role there, to negotiate our position there. Do not think that I naively draw an idyllic picture of "China Town" or "Little India"; I am not ignorant of the obscure aspects and the perverse effects of these gatherings. But we must recognize that our system of integration supposed to be *in the French way* has finally generated shameful places of alienation and relegation. In these enclaving ghettos that we call "neighborhoods", hoping to give them a cultural blush, we live there because we are born there and we stay because the school, enclaved too, does not give the means to get out. What language are spoken in these confined places? What exactly is this language supposed to be the one of suburbs, these ghettos or ... "young people"⁴ ? ... Contrary to what some demagogues suggest by praising its stripping expressiveness and its creative power, it is actually a reduced language in its ambitions and its means. The mechanisms that lead to this "shrinkage" are quite simple to describe. It is simply what we call the

⁴ That would allow to think there is a language for old people!...

phenomenon of "linguistic economy". The term "economy" does not indicate here "saving money" but "adjusting its language spending to the requirements of a specific communication situation". The more we know someone, the more we have in common with him and the less we need words to communicate together. In short, if I speak to an individual who lives like me, who believes in the same god as me, who has the same concerns and the same lack of social perspectives, it will "go without saying". I will not need to use precise words and carefully organize my thoughts because we share so many things, we have so many similar constraints and frustrations that vagueness becomes the rule of a socially perverted language game.

C - Words that do not want to say anything anymore

Social ghettoization leads to such a degree of closeness and complicity that the decrease of the linguistic means used appears as a right adaptation of the words weight to the softened shock of photographs seen a thousand times. These new words, or rather recycled words, always carry an exaggerated meaning and consequently an information all the more imprecise. Take the famous example of the word "bouffon" ("jester"). Bernard Pivot is delighted to see that this old word, fallen into disuse, is brought back into fashion by young people of the suburbs which give him a second youth. In fact, what we see is that the first meaning of "bouffon" in the "jester of the king" carried precise and strong information that when we received this word, we had no doubt what he was talking about. The use of "jester" to qualify an individual as in "ce kum, c'est un bouffon!" ("this guy's a jester!") opens up a field of infinitely greater meaning: it can be used to give a negative appreciation of someone, whatever the criteria on which it is based and whatever the nature of the link that binds us to that person ... in other words, any individual whose behavior does not suit us is a "jester".

So we see how this recycled word has become a kind of "semantic balloon" inflated to the extreme, tossed around, ready for all the contextual compromises. Because if anyone, on any occasion can be called a "jester", this word has almost no sense, just as other words suffer from the same semantic anemia such as "cool", "serious", "nique" ... If this language works - and it works - it is because it has been created in and for a shrinking social context where connivance compensates for the vagueness of words. When the number of things to say is reduced, when the number of people to whom one speaks is weak, the approximation does not prevent the communication. But outside the ghetto, when you have to talk to people you do not know, when these people do not know in advance what you're going to tell them, it

becomes a whole new challenge. An empty vocabulary and an approximate organization of the sentences do not give the slightest chance to take the challenge up. Social ghettoization causes linguistic insecurity, which double-locks the gates of the ghetto: an infernal cycle that a school, which is itself isolated, turns out to be unable to break.

V- Illiteracy and intellectual vulnerability

Linguistic insecurity incites those who undergo it to make a punctual analysis and radical classification; it makes it difficult to question words and explanatory principles falsely presented as universal.

A- Simplistic approach, radicalness, sectarianism.

A citizen who is deprived of real linguistic power, who can hardly conceptualize and argue, will not be able, to get the necessary distance that is conducive to reflection and analysis. He will certainly be more sensitive to all sectarian and fundamentalist ideas claiming to provide him simple, immediate and final answers. He can more easily be seduced by all the stereotypes that present the world under a Manichean and dichotomous vision. He will submit more obediently to the most rigid and arbitrary rules as long as they give him the illusion of transcending unbearable daily frustrations. But our children will have to face a world in which being excessively naive is often fatal. A world in which totalitarian and sectarian discourse and texts do not contain even a grammatical error and follow an unfailing argumentation. Being watchful and strong against perverse uses of the language, being ready to impose one's own speeches and texts in harmony with what he truly thinks are our obligations to teach to a child if we would like him to give an honourable meaning to this world.

Anyone can fully enjoy his citizenship without clearly understands all the challenges of the language: especially daring to speak to the most foreigner among the foreigners to tell this one the weirdest things that could be told. Because to surpass ourselves, we must share many precise words and a relevant and rigorous grammar with the others. Of course, we must respectfully accept the various structures of our language, as no languages are unchanging; but we must claim the aim of languages is to gather, to transcend cleavages, to heal tears. Languages mustn't annihilate cultural and social differences, but they make them audible to each other; in that way, languages help to protect social bonds and prevent our community from becoming groups insensitive to each other, ready for all the clashes, for all types of violence. We are all individually and collectively responsible for bringing the communication function of our language to the highest level of requirement: facing distance and the unknown

by always choosing arguments instead of blows, coherence instead of obscurantism, and tolerance instead of racism.

B – Free will and discriminating intelligence.

False prophets will give to these young people, whose identities are vague, but who are made to feel a little different, the illusory cocoon of a newfound identity and the participation to a distant mythical battle.

How many young people, among those who are targeted by these formidable offers, will be able to strongly question them; how many young people will be able to put aside their uncertainties, their frustrations and their distresses and avoid the pitfalls where the false prophets want to make them fall? I'm worried they are numerous to be tempted by introversion and blind bias. Because to resist, from their youngest age, they should be prepared to question uncompromisingly speeches and texts, used to bravely place their own words on the words of the others. But when only imprecise words are available, when the capacities of explanation and argumentation are weak, it's hard to imagine for a young person to challenge and strongly discredit ideas that tie them up pretending to free them.

Of course, young illiterate people are not the only ones weak to such arguments. Nevertheless, they are the least able to defend themselves. As they can read but usually read a little, as they can write but usually never write, many of them will be handed over tied to these dangerous proselytes. Among all those young people whom mindless television programs make stupid and whom regular use of cannabis makes go gaga, how many among them will have a taste for analysis and controversy? Because, regarding intellectual vulnerability, illiteracy is the hidden part of intellectual and moral weakness.

We must teach to all the children in this country that the authority of a speech or a text never depends on the status of the one who created it and, in no instance, ethnicity or religion, whatever it is, can't prevent the free exercise of an intelligence : these two principles are shaping a thinking free of constraints and prejudices ; a thinking that will not be fooled by clever charlatans, a thinking that will not accept that really deep disagreements can justify violence or murder, even in the slightest degree. This is called « discriminating intelligence » ; it is the precious secret that humans pass on, from generation to generation, hoping children eventually will know how to build a slightly better world than the one they have gotten. Today education must first work in the ground of linguistic power and intellectual resistance.

C – Irresponsibility of right-minded people

This current trend must be denounced: the one in which social and cultural distress is toned down, in which some painful handicaps are covered up. They are softened in the blurred concept of cultural diversity with the demagogical pretext of avoiding stigmatisation.

Reading difficulties and even more writing difficulties have nothing to do with identity; they worsen social marginalisation and make it harder to get through. To be politically correct, is it enough to describe the clever strategies of citizens who expend great effort in circumventing daily obstacles that their reading and writing difficulties demand? To avoid being accused of conservatism, should we be astonished by a lively and picturesque ghetto language that imprison more than free? Finally, in the name of the right to difference (and to indifference), should we accept that some people are not allowed to surpass themselves and to read a text written by a person they have never seen, to discover the intelligence of another one they haven't met yet? If illiterate men and women are entitled to be respected and supported, illiteracy, which prevents enjoying their citizenship, is not acceptable; the sociological description of this phenomenon does not give it any sociocultural nobility.

Wondering if illiteracy really exists is completely ridiculous. We all agree that this concept includes linguistic difficulties of complete different nature and degree. We are all convinced that it refers to different social and cultural situations. Nevertheless everyone who does not understand completely oral and written languages lives a more difficult life than the others; they have fewer opportunities to decide their social fate; they are weaker when reading sectarian and fundamentalist texts.

The only true question is to know how and who with we will try to share fairly the linguistic power in the following years: speak fair, that is to say to claim firmly one's speech will but considering the others necessarily; read justly, that is to say to respect the text written by another one and to give one's own interpretation willingly; write justly and enjoy each word we have chosen but be concerned by a demanding reader, as we know.

VI – What can we do?

Illiteracy is a national issue which goes really beyond the only reading and writing topic. Nowadays, being illiterate is being prevented to take part into the economical rise of this country because one is deprived of the lowest means required to the social and economic promotion. Nowadays, being illiterate is being imprisoned in a narrow sphere filled with collusion and proximity and isolated from social communication and common culture. Nowadays being illiterate is being weak facing dangerous texts and speeches given by unscrupulous people. Finally, being illiterate is being more easily violent because to find arguments and explanations is difficult. To conclude, illiteracy goes hand in hand with precariousness and marginalization and it becomes more difficult to get through it. So we should take urgent actions through a relevant as much as ambitious light.

A. Prevention

Today, if we want to put a stop to media buzz and dramatically reduce the number of illiterate people, we must immediately offer pupils failing at school a guided process which considers the mastery of basic knowledge as a right shared by everyone. We will distinguish four complementary objectives.

- Because the learning process starts in the young age, learning how to read must be built on a sound footing.

The Secretary of Education has wisely chosen to fight against school difficulties since the first school years and to help the weakest pupils. The first action is to split into two groups the first classes in primary schools in priority education areas. He, therefore, has had the audacity to finally admit that some children start primary school with a language behaviour which is in disagreement with a successful beginning in the written world. Neither autistic, nor aphasic, nor partially deaf, most of them bred in French-speaking families, they lack words, and as soon as they are six, they are destined to badly learn how to read and even worse to write. So this measure is fair and courageous because those children must be patiently and regularly helped as soon as kindergarten classes and only the splitting of first primary classes can allow it. But it won't be enough to reduce the size of the groups. We should give an excellent teaching to those weak pupils.

- *Precisely identifying words.*

The current researches show that young people with reading difficulties have a very low capacity to identify words; even if this handicap is not the only reason of illiteracy, it is one of

the main elements. Because they can't identify words precisely and entirely, they read a text in an approximate or even uncertain way. When they learn how to read, we must pay particular attention that every pupil learn how to identify words efficiently; that is to say they should be fast and precise readers. Identifying a word has nothing to do with riddles: pupils mustn't guess, experiment, and examine the context around an unknown word to identify this one. The signification of a word can never be «maybe»; we can make a mistake; we can succeed; but whatever the situation, it is the mastery of the code that makes us succeed or fail and never the uncertain contribution of the context.

When they start touching words, pupils will distinguish some of them through their length, their general look, their shape; but they will realize that such discriminating criteria are not enough. This stage, which is qualified as «logographic », is short and moves on to a more productive process of word identification. What will pupils rely on? At that time, they have to speak of a mental vocabulary in which the meaning of each word gets along with a particular sound combination. Therefore they have to match the letters combination they can see to the sounds combination they have in mind so that they will understand the meaning of the written word. In French, the relation between letters and sounds is indeed complex and leads to specific difficulties. Behind this true complexity, a regular set of rules about letters and sounds matches actually exists and allows young pupils to find **alphabetical logic** : in that way, pupils will be aware how the written code works ; they will understand how it works even before completely exhausting the complete relations between letters and letter combinations and various French sounds. That finding of alphabetic logic is at the centre of the learning process of word identification. Young pupils can identify a word they have never read because, little by little, they learn how to match the letter combination of a written word to its sound combination: without that ability, they would fail or be dependent when they read a word for the first time. The use of the phonic form of words is a way for pupils to enter the written code using what they have: words from the oral language.

- *Mastering the rules of the written code.*

We must have in mind that, while reading a French text, a reader can understand 85 % of the matches between the letters and the corresponding sounds if he has been taught to master those matches. Should a pupil prefer the immediate pleasure of approximate meaning of reading to being deprived of the mastery of a tool to reach a real autonomy? To learn how to

read, pupils must therefore learn explicitly and little by little how the written code works and understand particularly the matching process between graphic items (letters and written words) and phonic items of the oral language (the way it is pronounced). So it is easy to understand that comparing cycling with swimming is meaningless. When pupils learn how to read, they should clarify the contractual rules, one after another, more or less luckily, which determine the written code: the matches between the alphabetical compositions of words and their phonic compositions. The more pupils go farther into the mastery of reading, the more their deciphering operations *become automatic* and are done unconsciously until pupils get the impression that the meaning springs from the text itself without making the effort to build it.

While pupils learn how to read, learning how to match letters (or groups of letters) to sounds corresponding to them in the oral language is an essential skill, because it allows pupils to be able to *identify and understand* a word they have never read.

- *The aim of deciphering is to understand words.*

When they start the first class in primary school, your six-year-old pupils should have a memorized repertoire of around 2000 oral words. When you speak to them, it allows them to identify the « noise of a word » and, thanks to it, to understand the meaning when questioning this little mental dictionary. It is this same oral word dictionary they will be able to question when their teacher will learn to them how to translate into sounds what they will discover written in letters. In short, the founding principles of a successful reading learning are composed of a good mastery of letters/ sounds matching and the high quality of oral vocabulary.

Your pupils have never read the word « oranger » (orange tree); but because they have been taught these principles at school, they have learned that each letter or group of letters respectively matches with a sound of the language, and in a specific order or combination. So they are going to build « the noise of the word ». If they are going through that process, it is not just to verbalize the written word respecting its graphic combination, but also because, for them, that recreated noise represents *the key to access their oral dictionary*. Indeed, when they discover that the five sound /o.r.âj.é/ are used for the pronunciation of the syllables of the seven-letter word « oranger », they will be able to investigate into their « oral dictionary » to get the meaning matching with that phonic combination. In other words, as they translate into sounds what they see in letters, syllable after syllable, they can investigate into their oral

dictionary by asking: "is there a match? » and this dictionary will give them the meaning of the written word they have just discovered, without any adults helping.

- *Without vocabulary, you can't read well whatever the method of reading.*

We rapidly understand the determining importance of the quantity and the quality of vocabulary a child has before he will learn how to read. If, as it occurs for some of them who couldn't get a benevolent and demanding mediation at the same time, the child has a very limited amount of words, and usually not very precise, so his mental dictionary will answer : « there aren't any matches » the more often. By the dint of never having an answer to his question, the child can deduce that « there will never be any matches », that is to say there isn't any meaning behind the noise he has built. So it is not because a child is deciphering that he can understand, but because what he is deciphering doesn't ring a bell in his repertoire of vocabulary created orally when he was little. For deciphering makes sense, words must pre-exist in his head.

A long and relentless work to enrich the vocabulary of children and particularly the less privileged ones; a precise handling of the reading process to crack its secrets; the reading battle is over thanks to that toil and not thanks to an ideo-visual approach which, on the pretext of ease, leads your children into an impossible situation.

- *From deciphering to spell recognition of words.*

Of course, when you decipher, you can identify words and understand their meaning. But it is not an end in itself. It is only the first step, necessary but not enough.

You must be aware that, when a child must read aloud, syllable after syllable, word after word, he feels exhausted little by little, and his entire intelligence, mobilized into the deciphering work, is not strong enough to build the meaning of sentences and texts. So little by little, he must drop the help of oralisation and directly match the spelling composition of the word to its sound. In short, along with the mental dictionary that allows him to speak and which is composed of phonic words, he will have to build a new mental dictionary in which the spelling composition of each word will match to its corresponding meaning. So he won't have to pronounce the written words to identify them anymore, he will identify their respective spelling compositions and thus will be able to understand their corresponding meaning.

So a child starts learning how to read through *the indirect approach*, which gets through the sounds to identify the words, and *then will use the direct approach*, which makes the letter combination of a word the first choice. The best way to go from one approach to another is to train your reading learner to automate the matching between written words and oral words ; that is to say to get a very good ability in deciphering so that he can do it faster and faster and almost without thinking about it.

Thanks to regular and automatic activities, this automatization will give him the opportunity to get directly the meaning of words at the moment when he will recognize their spelling compositions. For instance, you can prepare papers with very easy words on them at first, such as PAPA (daddy), TAPIS (rug), BATEAU (boat), and then write more complex words such as TROUSSE (pencil case), LOCOMOTIVE (locomotive), MONTAGNE (mountain)... You show him one paper and leave him enough time to decipher and oralise it at first. Next, you reduce the reading time so that he will decipher faster and faster until deciphering becomes automatic until he will move on to the spelling recognition of the word. Patience and regularity are the rules for this type of activities.

➤ *Make the pedagogy of understanding the school priority*

A child learns how to read only once, even if he probably will have to understand the process of a new language one day. In other words, in his mother language, he definitely understands what reading means after having understood what speaking means. So a young reader must learn to have the right balance between the two reading requirements: a balance between his legitimate ambitions of personal interpretation and respectful consideration of the conventions of the text. It is as if he learned how to weigh what he has read on scales.

On the left scale, the pupil will put all his obedience, all his respect for the text. The linguistic choices, which the writer has made, the respected conventions, accepted collectively, and the set of rules the writer enacted for his unknown reader. The pupil must totally respect and obey these rules. On the right scale, on the contrary, his firm convictions, his hidden anxieties, his quiet hopes, and his accumulated experiences will weigh. Everything that makes him a resolute and unique human being. On this scale, he therefore will put pressure on the personal desire of interpreting that text as any other readers has interpreted it. He doesn't outrage, gush or grieve like anyone else. His landscapes and his characters are not the same as another one too.

So learning how to understand is learning how to negotiate a delicate balance between the surges of a wild *imagination* and the obedience to the *Authority* imposed by the text itself. Thus the schooling system must teach the pupils an honest and moderate reading process. It is not a revelation; but, on the contrary, it is the result of an explicit and honest learning process. They regularly and coherently must understand the rights and the duties that are imposed during a correct and free reading of a text. In a *Atelier de Compréhension de Textes* (ACT = text understanding workshop), the way the teacher accompanies pupils is therefore completely different from the one highlighted by the traditional teaching relation. The teacher starts « giving birth » to the representations each student has in mind after reading the text. He welcomes them patiently and benevolently and keeps the diverse precious records. He knows that what is important at this point is that each student personally uses the *illustrating function*. But the time to arbitrate and classify comes after; the time when the text and the author claim, through the teacher's voice, their legitimate right to distinguish the acceptable interpretation of betrayal. While he is going through the hard negotiations in the understanding of the text with his schoolmates, each student will gradually be aware of the stakes under the text comprehension. He will understand that in this process, he needs to be rigorous, demanding, and *respectful of linguistic conventions*, but thanks to it, his *imagination and critical analysis* lead into landscapes to explore as no one else can do it. Whatever the nature of the text, secular or sacred, a student will thus understand that no one can or must understand it in his place.

The pedagogy of understanding must be one of the major issues of the schooling system today. Because the slightest lack of balance seriously corrupts the reading action. So the excessive respect given to a political or sacred text can change into fearful servitude, to such an extent that trying to understand it could look like an offence to its author. But, on the contrary, when the text is the convenient first step for an unlimited imagination, when the founding rules are neglected because of casualness and incompetence, thus the text departs from its author; its memory is betrayed; all the traces, which the author wants to leave behind, are erased; and the transmission line is broken.

➤ **Place differentiation at the centre of the teaching process.**

For many years, sociologists and, more lately, economists have denounced the lack of social mix in some schools gathering the most underprivileged students and becoming school ghettos. So they regularly call the Secretary of Education to take strong measures to « mix » students, because, for them, social mix is the key of academic equality. For some people, the

distribution of state-run schools in an area would be the efficient tool of a firmer distribution which allows to have students from various economic and cultural backgrounds work together in the same classes. Others support more radical measures according to which loads of students are driven by bus in order to allow them to join schools far from their homes. All these measures share the naive thought that diversity in a school could be « decided » from above; all of them collide with a general refusal from families; all of them are rapidly and widely circumvented. All of them are miserably failing and emphasize again the split between private schools and state schools to the cost of the last ones. A larger cultural and social diversity in schools won't definitely come from outside the schools; but on the contrary, personalization of the learning process in each class could add diversity when the needs of each student, their learning pace and their personal talents would be identified. In short, the application of personalised pedagogy will allow weak students to overcome the hurdles of the curriculum at their own pace instead of failing. It is expected that teachers are given enough resources and training so that they can differently teach pupils whose needs are obviously different. It is thus necessary to extend the measure « more teachers than classes » only if (as it often happens) it is not only a light diminution of the number of pupils in the classes. The provision of these additional resources must be conditional on the implementation of a differentiated pedagogy whose regularity and efficiency will be checked.

The impacts that the school system can derive from personalised pedagogy are high speaking of fairness and efficiency. But, the application of such pedagogy in fundamental subjects is difficult when a teacher must « face » around thirty pupils. Many teachers, justifiably worried, rightly retort: « if I work with a group of ten pupils on an activity, what should I do with the others? ». To overcome all the concerns, it seems sensible to us to give a concrete example of a device used today in more than ten thousand classes: Réseau des Observatoires Locaux de la Lecture (ROLL). ROLL has always been against any kind of stigmatizing categorization and against any kind of attempts to predict a failure based on punctual results. But, on the contrary, it tries hard to provide to teachers the resources to make a regular analysis of what each pupil acquires and to allow each one of them to improve according to their own skills. This work of improvement is carried out autonomously; the main benefit of this is that the teacher has more room to use pedagogy of comprehension in working groups.

➤ **Make enduring and skilful readers**

One of the main difficulties of a majority of non-expert readers is to have the resources and ... the courage to face the LENGHT. The latest experimental researches (BIEMILLER 2012,

GIASSON 2010) clearly show that the real handicap of non-expert readers is the fact they can't and are scared reading a text from 4 to 5 pages long. In other words, the main inequality is the split between the “enduring” readers, who can go beyond short social documents or literary excerpts without difficulties or fears, and people who are scared by the prospect of reading dozens of pages, or who are quickly exhausted by a laborious reading and eventually give up every long reading or stop after the first pages. We want to help these “low-readers” efficiently and simply in all public reading places and, of course, at primary school before middle school.

The other principal difficulty in the reading learning process is to understand what reading means: learning how to negotiate a necessary balance between the respect given to the text and its author and the fair claim of interpreting the text in one's own way.

The aim of La Machine à Lire is to work on both difficulties together. Given to the latest researches (BENTOLILA 2011, DESNIERES 2008, MESNAGER 2007), we know that non expert readers, who are less exercised to follow their reading, give up because of some linguistic and semiotic features. At the top of these features, there are too long descriptive developments and too deep introspective phases in their point of view. So it is necessary to suggest books to our “non-expert readers” “free” from these features that are not encouraging and lead them to stop. In other words, we have made up a “library” of about thirty books from 50 to 150 pages favouring the sequence of actions and mitigating the most important difficulties of vocabulary. It is managed by a web search engine in which you can choose the literary genre, the difficulty level and the reading length.

The idea is close to the progressive training of a runner. He walks the first course, then he jogs until being breathless, he starts walking again and, as soon as he feels ready, he starts running again lengthening the course a little. So day after day, the course will be longer and longer, until walking won't be compulsory but only a potential choice. In the same way, our idea is to “lead non-expert readers” to a longer and longer reading and to suggest them an “alternation upon request” between times of autonomous reading and times of text listening. This kind of help will allow “non-expert readers” to decide their alternating pace by themselves. In other words, when they feel “breathless” in their autonomous reading, they click to get a listening help; until they feel ready enough to start their individual reading by themselves again. Some supports are set up to persuade them kindly to start their reading again so that the comfort of listening doesn't lead them to laziness. This choice of alternating

pace is necessary because, even with excellent experimentation, we can't be sure of being able to program alternating levels that would match exactly to the needs of each reader.

Obviously the aim is not to settle low readers into an easy static alternation between listening times and reading times but, on the contrary, it is to persuade them little by little to read more and more pages of the book. In other words, the listening/reading alternation must lead them to grow a stronger enduring ability. Until they can do without listening breaks and read in a long and continuous way.

➤ **Lucidity and requirement rather than indulgence and cruelty**

Make students repeat a year exceptional won't change anything at the unavoidable failure at school of some children. At the very most one could defer evidence of failure.

Repeating a year, that is to say doing again the same lessons that led to misunderstanding and misinterpretation the year before, won't be of great value; that would mean repeating a whole learning year whereas only a small amount of skills may be missing. But, however, let students, who would certainly fail because of their shortcomings, pass to the next class obligingly would be a demonstration of cruel cynicism.

So the real issue is neither the indulgent and automatic passing to the next level nor the blind repetition of the year. The real challenge that should be taken up will be to change the structure of the curriculum so that *the current rupture logic will be replaced by a continuity and support logic*. It is the only option to switch from an indulgent and cruel system to a system mixing requirement and generosity. For that, it will be necessary to manage the passing to the next levels which students have to pass from Kindergarten to middle school with lucidity and attention as each of them are traps in which weak students fall into.

As soon as they pass a hazardous level in the curriculum, *transition chambers*, as we call them, could be organized. A transition chamber is not a test that the end will be exclusion or repeating the year. This is a *diagnostic evaluation* time based upon the clear expectations of the next level. As soon as the specific difficulties of each student are identified, early enough in the schoolyear (on March the latest), differentiated refresher courses will be organised with lucidity during four or five months. It appears to be the only answer so that passing to the next level will be promising and no more threatening. *Clear display of the expectations of the next level; identification of individualized skills profiles and finally development designed for their needs are the main ingredients of transition chambers.*

B. Fighting against illiteracy: an approach that should eventually become pragmatic and coherent!

What has been done to reduce illiteracy among young adults in France? Since more than twenty years, people have been outraged by the figures about illiteracy; teachers, tutors and parents are urged, volunteers are summoned but the situation slowly but surely becomes worse. Does this mean that no credits have been allocated to social inclusion? Far from it! But in all these induction programs, the fight against illiteracy seems to have been forgotten. The main part has too often come down to display suitable statistics about work placements all the more unstable that the necessary mastery of basic knowledge is neglected. *The next essential reform about learning will have little impact if it doesn't take into account the fact that some young people can't read and write precisely and efficiently.*

On the field, the different administrations involved into the fight against illiteracy work simultaneously but not often hands in hands. Even worse, most of them apply a “counter strategy”: everything is ready to welcome the young illiterate people only if they come where they are expected. As to associations, which are often devoted lavishly into the fight, they deal with a crippling bureaucracy who places them into a delicate situation so that they can't undertake innovations or serious trainings. So, in each area, we have to create the conditions for mobilizing the associations and administrations on a national project: *show days after days and in concrete terms to hundreds of thousands young adults, who have painfully failed at school, that reading and writing are the main weapons to build their own professional and social future.* Because what must be understood is that the burden of proof is on us in the fight against illiteracy. Those young people won't be convinced by moral speeches praising the benefits of written works; we have to make them feel that reading, writing, arguing and counting will allow them to better control their life choices, that is to say to set themselves their own targets. In short, a guided course must be created and end up at a real cultural and professional future while trying to answer with tenacity to the question that the schooling system has always avoided: “*why should we learn?*”