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French “Passerelles” (transitional preschool) Classes: Outcomes of a specific program for Early Childhood Education

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This study examines sample classrooms in order to evaluate the cognitive and social dimensions of the transition of students from preschool to primary school, with a special focus on "passerelle" classes, which are a special type of transitional preschool program that exist in France. A main interest of the study is children's transition from home and community life to "class life" (developmental success in a formal education setting). Grounded in evidence-based practices, the present empirical and in-depth approach takes place at École Maternelle (ÉM) Perrault in Pézenas (Hérault). As of January 2021, the study was composed of 102 pupils divided into four multi-level classes (from 25 to 73 months), and the "passerelle" class itself (from 21 to 42 months). The "passerelle" program in this town has existed since 2000, to welcome children to school alongside their parents, with the aim of working collaboratively with the other social stakeholders involved in early childhood development.

Mots-clés :
Collaboration, Éducation, Stakeholders, France, Early Childhood, Parents

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1. Education at home and first introduction to school

A number of empirical studies establish that an increased socialization of young children, during the 20-26 to 40 months following birth, significantly influences the ability to enter into the first formal learning setting (cf. among others Maso-Taulère, 2005; Joignaux, 2009; Becker, 2011; Hackett et al., 2020; Torterat, Azaoui, 2021). During this period, the combination of learning within and outside the family, constitutes a determining factor for children's verbal-cognitiveacquisition (Veneziano, 2000; Hudelot et al., 2010; Sauvage, 2015; Lüke et al. ., 2017; Canut et al., 2018; Vandenbroeck, 2021). In this regard, what can be called the "contact circle" of young children (Torterat et al., 2019), is understood in the broad sense. This means the daily support of daycare workers, preschool teachers and other social stakeholders that are responsible for the socio-cultural activities that foster (on different levels) the link that distinguishes between simply what *precedes* primary school versus what *facilitates* a high-quality preparation for primaryschool.

On the specifically socio-discursive level, the stakes are multiple. In addition to support for intra-family dialogue, there is a question of getting children to *actively participate in the creation of language* (Martel, 2009b) by encouraging them regularly, to move from the *unformulated* to the *formulated* (Torterat, 2012b, 2021). The constant (re)working of these skills therefore relates in whole or in part to the spontaneity of the topic, and intelligibility for the interlocutor, in particular in connection with the exercise of phonological awareness (Soulé, 2018). These learning processes and social interactions thus make it possible to familiarize the children, moreover, with how language will be used specifically in the school environment. This can constitute: gatherings, various types of workshops, free-choice games, introduction to writing, and many other educational activities, which can be hosted by a variety of institutions, including even toy or classic children's libraries.

2. Questions concerning collaboration

2.1. Dialog and discussion about learning

The continuous monitoring of the discourse development of young children is part of several distinct arguments. The first led some to distinguish differences using the metric of the “below average”, “average” and “above average" talkers (Florin, 1991, 1995; cf. Pulido, 2016), but such a division is subject to critique among linguists when concerning classes before primary school (Grandaty, Turco, 2001; Péroz, 2010; Masseron, Péroz, 2018). A second argument, promoted by the latter authors, applies to the "intra/interlocutory" dimensions of language expression, with a focus on “tasks” and “behaviors” relating to discourse (Banks-Leite, 1999 ; Grandaty, 2006; Torterat, 2014; Péroz, 2016).

This second perspective is in line with the conclusions from studies done in the field of language acquisition from different methodological viewpoints (in particular the so-called "emergentist" approaches: Salazar-Orvig, Hudelot, 1989; Ninio, Snow, 1999; Hickmann, 2003; Bassano, 2007 ; Hudelot, 2007 ; Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, 2008), and constitute part of the French *curriculum* of preschool. Indeed, language acquisition of children appears in the dialogical presentation in which the verbal dimension represents only one of the elements of individual expression. Moreover, the component of collaboration encouraged by the bond with the parents, but also through the skills of early childhood education professionals to grasp the issues, provide in this respect a zone for effective learning with multiple variables (cf. Gilakjani et al., 2011; Torterat et al., 2020).

On this subject, one of the common strategies regarding language acquisition assessment consists of identifying the individual abilities of a child, for example, to rely on the phono-prosodic dimensions of language, to use and reuse words, or such constructions, from this period of 20-26 months as well as thereafter (Kail et al., 2005; Martel, 2009a; Fayol, Kail, 2015; Ochs, Schieffelin, 2017). On the cognitive level, it has

also been shown that access to macrosyntactic information predominates in children's understanding of what is generally formulated (Snow, Ferguson, 1977; Bucciarelli et al., 2003; Barret , 2017). The evaluation of language acquisition in 2-3 year olds in multiple interactions, when the groups do not exceed (or exceed very little) 10 to 15 subjects, makes it possible to create an interdisciplinary analysis (over such a period with such a population of children) and an in-depth follow-up of "intra" and "inter"-individual variations in language development. This follow-up is easier in an interprofessional context, as it makes it possible to extend the study over 4 to 6 years, and into the later grades of primary school. As noted in the accompanying document,*Programmesde l'École française* (MEN, 2016):

The implementation of these principles makes it possible to observe student progress on the following points: - the time given to pupils to reflect, the repetition of open questions, the possibility given to pupils to take up and reformulate what has already been said [...]; - the lengthening of the responses, confronting the students with the real problems of narration, both on the linguistic level (coherence of interpropositional sequences, marks of the construction of the second level) and on the semantic level (management of information , organization of discourse).[1]

2.2. The Study

The study setting includes small groups of children (10-15, uncombined headcount), making it possible to consider the cognitive and social dimensions of this very particular transition, which leads from the first forms of community life to "class life," strictly speaking. Since the 1990s in France, two early childhood education systems have been in competition. One system is the “très petite section” (very early section) of preschool that allows children at the age of 2 to be optionally enrolled in preschool (“l'école maternelle”, in French) instead of at the obligatory age of 3. The other is the "passerelle" class option (Villain, Gossot, 2000; Castelle et al., 2013; Torterat and Soulé, forthcoming).

What these early childhood education systems teach us is that linguistic socialization in a group of peers exerts a triple influence on language acquisition: an increase of inter-individual stimuli, the emergence of spontaneous dialogues, and the ability to remake and reformulate, along with the capability to take into account interactions with others (cf. Coletta, 2004; Hudelot, Salazar Orvig, 2005; Plana et al., 2011; Canut et al., 2013). At the same time, the necessity to support such criteria reinforces the need to guarantee the same educational standards for children from at-risk communities as well as those from more privileged backgrounds. This calls for maintaining the quality of learning, and above all against a lowering of the "prerequisites" for a more unequal "educational adaptation" that might appear to be a solution at first glance (cf. Joignaux, 2013; Wright, Neuman, 2014.

Grounded in evidence-based practices, the present empirical and in-depth study took place at École Maternelle (ÉM) Perrault in Pézenas (Hérault). As of January 2021, the

study was composed of 102 pupils divided into four multi-level classes (from 25 to 73 months), and the "passerelle" class itself (from 21 to 42 months). The "passerelle" program in this town has existed since 2000, and has made it possible to welcome children to school alongside their parents, with the aim of working collaboratively with the other social stakeholders involved in early childhood development. In particular, this includes the services of "PMI" (a maternal and child welfare office) and the municipal daycare center. Citing an IGEN-IGAS report of November 2000 (Villain, Gossot, 2000), underlined that these initiatives must above all benefit vulnerable populations (“particularly in certain underprivileged neighborhoods”, p. 6). This educational initiative of "passerelle" programs makes it possible to "create the conditions necessary for young children's successful socialization, to promote a gentle and progressive separation from the family [during the school day] and to support the parents in their duties and responsibilities [of educating their children]" (Ibid., p. 6, our translation).

As far as this study's research is concerned since 2000, the numbers recorded at École Perrault school have been fairly regular. In 2003, for example, out of 221 students enrolled at the school, 75 had benefited from enrolling in a "Passerelle" class (i.e. 33.93%). "Passerelle" classes can be viewed as a proactive form of early intervention that allow for an individual and graduated approach to the first introduction to formal education. Changes in the numbers of the "Passerelle" enrollment at Perrault for the years 2015-2022 are cited below in the table:

year of birth	year of admis-sion	number of children in Passerelle (over the year)	numbers of children in first class of preschool		before preschool (caregiving, day-nursery, daycare, other services)	
2013	2015	28	from P	non P	crèches (kindergar-ten, non mandatory)	RAM[2]
			12	23	21	4
2014	2016	24	12	13	13	4
2015	2017	23	15	18	9	5
2016	2018	30	19	11	7	1
2017	2019	23	18	5	7	3
2018	2020	24	10	14	5	4
2019	2021	18 au 10-02 2022 (projections 2022: 25)	9	13	4	data non consolidated

Regarding the teaching formats used in the "Passerelle" program, see Torterat et al. (2019), in particular with regards to language. However, the main point of interest here is that a significant number of pupils from 2017 enrolled during 2020-2021 in CP classes (first year of primary school starting at age 6), where national assessments, standardized for all classes in the country, were carried out. The following section

presents the main results for the 2017 numbers. The 2018 and 2019 numbers will normally become available in 2024.

3. Discussion of results and initial conclusions

The sample below corresponds to the number of pupils in CP during the 2020-2021 school year (sample group of two classes subdivided into four cohorts).

Sample Passerelle 2017	**Passerelle Groups (E)**		Control Groups (C)	
	Class 1 (A)	**Class 2 (B)**	Class 1 (A)	Class 2 (B)
14	**6 (22,2%)**	**8 (29,6%)**	21	19

The national assessments were organized on the basis of fully standardized questions[3]. For the present study, the corresponding results were encoded according to three levels established by the scores of the pupils, through sets noted as "satisfactory", "below satisfactory" and "at-risk", on 8 questions of which the first 5 appear below. The other three relate to children's ability to understand the concepts of “words”, “short utterances” and “long utterances”. Pupils who did not respond to at least 6 out of 8 questions during the exam period, were not taken into account in the sample group (here 1E and 1C in class A, and 1C in class B). In the case of only one to two non-responses, the data was encoded on the basis of an accommodating variable (here the median over all the questions, 15 in all). The results are indicated below in green in the event of equivalent scores between the experimental group and the control group. The results in blue show the event of scores exceeding the coeff. > 1.1 (in bold if coeff. > 1.2) for the experimental group, and plain font in the case of poor scores for cohort E.

→ within class A (27 students)

pupils	Compare series of letters (% (tot/pot))	Recognition of letters (% (tot/pot))	Designation of letters and sounds applied	Phonological units operating (phonemes)	Prosodic units operating (syllables)
EA	83,3 (10/12)	33,3 (4/12)	91,6 (11/12)	**100 (12/12)**	**100 (12/12)**
CA	85,7 (36/42)	57,1 (24/42)	78,5 (33/42)	**80,9 (34/42)**	**64,2 (27/42)**

→ within class B (27 students)

pupils	Compare series of letters (% (tot/pot))	Recognition of letters (% (tot/pot))	Designation of letters and sounds applied	Phonological units operating (phonemes)	Prosodic units operating (syllables)
EB	100 (16/16)	**75 (12/16)**	**81,2 (13/16)**	**93,7 (15/16)**	**100 (16/16)**
CB	86,8 (33/38)	**50 (19/38)**	**65,7 (25/38)**	**71 (27/38)**	**73,7 (28/38)**

The results between the two cohorts show some similarities, which are corroborated by the overall relative percentages:

pupils	Compare series of letters (% (tot/pot))	Recognition of letters (% (tot/pot))	Designation of letters and sounds applied	Phonological units operating (phonemes)	Prosodic units operating (syllables)
E	92,9 (26/28) **+ 6,7**	57,1 (16/28) **+ 3,4**	85,7 (24/28) **+ 13,2**	96,4 (27/28) **+ 20,2**	100 (28/28) **+ 31,3**
C	86,2 (69/80)	53,7 (43/80)	72,5 (58/80)	76,2 (61/80)	68,7 (55/80)

However, it can be seen that the scores obtained by the students from the "Passerelle" program exceed the other cohort, with percentage differences ranging from 3.4% to 31.3%. It is important to note that the best scores concern aspects of phono-prosodic development and the links between prosody and letter recognition.

It should be noted that these are the first results of an exploratory study conducted with a limited sample (54 pupils) and from two cohorts of CP (first elementary school level). The possible methodological biases concern the differences between the two cohorts. Namely, the central issue is if these differences according to classes A and B are significant for questions 1 and 5, and to a lesser extent 3 and 4, then they would be contradictory to question 2. This then raises the question ofthe impact of previous and subsequent background information on the overall representativeness of the data. It would also be appropriate to measure the influence of the conditions under which questions were administered, accounting for variations among evaluators. Even if the exams are standardized and overseen by administrators, variations can occur. However, the conclusion that we can draw at this time is that the collaboration with families and other early childhood education stakeholders, on the socialized learning of language, seems to contribute to significantly reducing inequalities among children enrolled in a "Passerelle" program. It is of further significant interest that all of these students come from vulnerable backgrounds.

Our hypotheses, partly announced in Torterat et al. (2019), are that the benefits for children are numerous when a school system develops targeted programs that allow multiple stakeholders in early childhood education to work together, with the possibility for parents to participate. Parents regularly participating in early learning activities have a lasting impact on children's language acquisition abilities, at least up to the first year of primary school. The fact that the learning most concerned relates to procedural skills

and phono-prosodic awareness constitutes, here too, an interesting aspect, given the prerequisite relationship between language acquisition and learning to write (for example, the case of letter recognition: see Negro, Genelot, 2009). Nevertheless, it is necessary to verify these hypotheses over a minimum of three evaluation sessions, with an overall sample of 160 to 180 pupils, before drawing more universal conclusions. On the other hand, we are of the opinion that collecting more data until the time of the French national evaluations at the level of CE2 (8 years old), would involve too many variables and would in fact impede understanding the nuanced impact of "Passerelle" programs on language acquisition.

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1Our translation.

2RAM : Réseau d'Assistantes Maternelles (network of caregivers)

3According to the French National Minister of Education (2022), "the situations proposed relate to the transition from oral to written, letter recognition, phonology, oral and written comprehension, and reading aloud. The assessment takes place in 3 sequences with collective and individual methods. Reading skills assessment activities require individual time. The effective working time of the student is estimated at 8 min for the first sequence and 10 min for the second sequence. The third sequence corresponds to the two individual tests whose duration is fixed at 2 min. Additional time for explanations and examples is to be expected" (our translation).