# INTRODUCTION

## The fabrication of the autonomous learner

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The "autonomous learner" is an omnipresent figure in present-day education. It evokes an active, engaged, responsible, and self-reflective individual taking learning into their own hands. The figure lies at the heart of current learning conceptions that are disseminated by the OECD (Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010; OECD, 2019; 2006). In consequence, it shapes educational policies, curricula, classroom practices, and far beyond, the way we think about education. Kindergartens, schools, and universities design specific spatial and temporal settings, such as learning studios or hybrid learning environments to foster autonomous learning. Schools can profile themselves as innovative by organizing classrooms into self-directed, self-regulated, or personalized learning environments. Far beyond such particular classroom arrangements, the figure of the autonomous learner influences curricula, teaching practices, and the assessment of pupils in schools.

With the notion of the "autonomous learner", we address an ongoing, profound transformation of education that relocates its focus from classroom teaching to the individual student as a learner. It is accompanied by a discursive shift that discusses education predominantly in terms of "learning" (Biesta, 2015). We claim that this present-day focus on the individual as a learner is shaped by philosophical conceptions of autonomy. Albeit liberal ideas of autonomy have informed our understanding of education for a long time, it is being transformed by the recent learning-centredness. In the present-day learning topography, autonomy amalgamates and intersects with notions of agency, self-direction, self-competence, self-management, self-regulation, etc. Thereby, it is striking that the very term autonomy is, by and large, conspicuously absent in today's discourse on learning. While the *élève autonome* holds some currency in the French discussion (Durler, 2015; Glasman, 2016; Lahire,

2001; Patry, 2018; Périer, 2014), the notion of autonomy is hardly present in the German debate, where the term *Selbstständigkeit* prevails. The term *autonomy* however is widely used in the field of foreign language learning in the literature in English (see later in this chapter). By insisting on the term *autonomy* and coupling it with the notion of learning, we highlight a conceptual relation that often remains implicit. Tackling the self-referentiality of the learning subject by the classical term autonomy, we connect the ostensibly innovative approach with its historical antecedents. It is an invitation to think about the legacies of former understandings of autonomy in education and how these are translated and transformed in present-day learning approaches.

## Autonomy-oriented learning settings as a dispositif

The figure of the autonomous learner can only be understood by locating it in the context of the neoliberal political agenda that prefigures discourses on the learning society and lifelong learning (Field, 2006). In view of the unknown future demands of the learning society, students must be able to autonomously organize, plan, and reflect on their own learning. They are expected to "learn how to learn" so that they prepare themselves to become lifelong learners. It is not a question of acting directly on the individual, but of giving them the tools to act by themselves, to make them responsible by "activating" them (Astier, 2007). The autonomous learner corresponds to the entrepreneurial self (Bröckling, 2007), who is eager to actively approach the hitherto unknown challenges of the future. The autonomous learner shows an intrinsic "will to learn" and pursues learning as an investment in her or his human capital (Simons & Masschelein, 2008). While the learning paradigm initially directed learners to deal with economic challenges, now they are to tackle ecological problems, community values, and wellness (OECD, 2019). Thus, the active learning subject is not only imagined as homo economicus but far beyond faces the demand to invest their competences as a socially responsible person.

The policy goal of the autonomous learner is related to inclusive education as the second other major policy trend transforming educational institutions in the present (UNESCO, 2016). The policies of inclusive education and individualized, autonomous learning are united by their recognition of diversity. Inclusive classrooms are accompanied by the demand to individualize teaching to the particular needs of the individual learner and in consequence transfer more autonomy to the learner (Frandji & Rochex, 2011). The joint vision of inclusive education and autonomous learning promises to increase social justice through their attempt to support each student by addressing their particular needs and by advancing their personal interests and talents (Ricken, 2018). They are less concerned with equality and the aim to make people equal, than with equity and to equalize the chances of each individual to fulfil their own life project (Marquis, 2015).

Alongside research that strives to improve students' skills in autonomous learning (e.g. Jansen, van Leeuwen, Janssen, Jak, & Kester, 2019; Reusser, Pauli, & Stebler, 2018; Schunk & Greene, 2018b), there is an urgent need to adopt a sociological perspective to critically analyse the demands and constraints that these efforts place on students and teachers. Taking an interest in the "*fabrication*" of the autonomous learner calls for an understanding of autonomous learning as a *dispositif*: it means to establish an analytical relationship between the "thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid" (Foucault, 1980, p. 194). Thus, speaking of a *dispositif* allows one to understand how the principles guiding the use of techniques, discourses, objects, and practices aim at fabricating today the "ideal pupil" (Becker, 1952) as an autonomous learner. The *dispositif* shapes the qualities that learners should demonstrate, their relationship to knowledge, and the power relations in which they must be involved. By focusing on autonomy-oriented learning settings as a *dispositif*, we favour an intermediate scale of conceptualization (Bonnéry, 2009), relating classroom practices and interactions to transformations of the *forme scolaire* (Vincent, 1994) and thus scrutinize the specific mode of present-day school socialization. Due to this anchoring of our perspective in the work of Michel Foucault, we keep the term *dispositif* in French throughout this book. To contextualize the sociological analysis of present-day, autonomy-oriented learning settings, we first summarize a historical systematic reconstruction of philosophical conceptions of autonomy and then reconstruct salient reform approaches of autonomous learning and their transformation during the 20th century.

## Autonomy as an "essentially contested concept" in philosophy

While the notion of autonomy is hardly explicitly present in the present-day learning discourse, it is widely discussed within educational and moral philosophy and is considered an "essentially contested concept" (Drerup, 2016b). Deriving from the Greek "autonomous" – self-legislation, it was used in Greek antiquity exclusively in its political sense and referred to the free determination of the internal affairs of a state. As a personal or ethical category, autonomy is only of marginal importance in antiquity (Pohlmann, 2017). Only at the beginning of the early modern era and in connection with the denominational conflicts did autonomy increasingly gain an ethical dimension; in this context, it was understood as freedom of faith or conscience in denominational conflicts and was reinterpreted from a political threat to a positive achievement in a protestant context (ibid.).

In the 18th century, too, the different categorial dimensions of the term – political here, personal there – were discussed and put in relation to each other.

The two conceptual domains have a paradoxical core in common, which was first elaborated by Rousseau in a political context, and by Kant in a moral and pedagogical context. Rousseau's basic figure can be summarized as follows: without lawful order or coercion, there is no freedom (Schweppenhäuser, 2003, p. 102). In Rousseau's concept, political autonomy means voluntary submission to the law one has adopted as a rational being. Self-legislation, critical reason and the sovereignty of the people are mutually related in this figure (ibid.). In the context of Kant's moral theory, autonomy stands for the opportunity of human beings to determine themselves as rational beings. As is well known, Kant defined with the categorical imperative the principle of autonomy as rational self-determination. The autonomous person defines themselves through their ability to reflect on their own motives for action and to judge them in the light of generalizability. To act according to the categorical imperative implies a subject-transcendent obligation as the self-determined commitment to broader principles (Pieper, 2000, p. 31). An autonomous judgement is made when the subject manages to distinguish between their first-order desires – their personal preferences and maxims – and those of the second order – the generalizable ethical principles – and to judge the former from the perspective of the latter (Dworkin, 2015). To be able to judge the desirability of one's own motives, however, implies the possibility of distancing oneself from one's subjective motives. The autonomous subject sensu Kant becomes recognizable and attackable as ahistorical, disembodied, and socially isolated.

The paradoxical figure of voluntary submission has made a career in the history of pedagogy up to the present day, in particular through Kant's pedagogically turned question: "*Wie kultiviere ich die Freiheit bei dem Zwange?*" (Kant, 1983 (1803), p. 711).[1] The paradox that children are to be led to autonomy through more or less imposing force seems to be one of the basic antinomies of pedagogical activity to this day. Some scholars elevate this antinomy to a constitutive feature of the structural conditions of the profession (Helsper, 2004). Other perspectives deconstruct the pedagogical paradox as a consequence of a misunderstood subjectivity and an overstretched concept of autonomy (Ricken, 2007). An idealistic understanding of subjectivity constructs an irreducible opposition between freedom and oppression, which is "pedagogically unsuitable" (ibid., p.163). Autonomy is not only an "illusion" (Meyer-Drawe, 2000); what's more, if autonomy is understood as absolutely freed from external determination, then the pedagogical efforts do not serve liberation, but rather subjugation (Ehrenberg, 1998; Ricken, 2007, p. 165).

The criticism of the concept of autonomy within the field of education is part of a chorus of critical voices within social studies and the humanities that reject or at least relativize liberal autonomy concepts, demands, and impositions. Based on the classic critical approaches of Berlin (1969) and Foucault

(2001), (neo-)liberal autonomy imperatives are revealed to be instruments of power that proclaim a one-sided, individualistic concept of freedom and promote the breaking up of societal solidarity and the economization of all areas of life.

The critique of the concept of autonomy seems to be connectable to almost all contemporary critical debates and thus shows how central autonomy is for modern self-understanding (Drerup, 2016b, p. 128). However, the rather brittle anchoring of the critical debate in theoretical conceptions of autonomy contributed to intensifying the debate on the implications of the concept of autonomy in the philosophy of education.

Ultimately, the autonomy problem raises the question of how pedagogical authority can be legitimized. Within the framework of a pedagogical ethics of autonomy, autonomy is considered a regulative idea that sets the compass in education (Reichenbach, 2017). The ability to reflect critically on one's motives and priorities in the light of their general desirability and to orient one's life accordingly (cf. Dworkin, 2015), is not a prerequisite and starting point, but the goal of education and upbringing. An orientation "thanks to which life may become more dignified and living together more civilized" (Reichenbach, 2017, p. 89; our translation).

Within the more recent discussion about the autonomy-theoretical legitimation of education and upbringing in the philosophy of education, some central lines of difference have emerged. The debate is, firstly, concerned with the understanding of freedom involved in the autonomy regime. If freedom is understood exclusively as negative ("free from"), as in neoliberal argumentation figures, this implies – in pedagogical terms – that one should largely refrain from disciplinary, direct controlling, and regulating measures. If, in contrast, freedom is understood positively as the "ability to" (Nussbaum, 2011), then supportive and accompanying measures come to the fore, which can very well manifest themselves as active intervention and influence. The latter understanding of freedom also takes into account the sociality of autonomy. A socio-relational conception of autonomy considers interpersonal, social, and institutional support as central to leading a self-determined life. This perspective insists on the idea that autonomy is a status that depends on the recognition of others (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 41). It thus distinguishes itself from theories that equate autonomy with individualism and maximum freedom of choice. A socio-relational understanding of autonomy is flanked by the concept of "vulnerability". Unlike idealistic theories of the subject, which conceive the autonomous subject as self-empowering and unassailable, a socio-relational concept of autonomy refers to vulnerability and dependence on others to the danger of acquiring "capability deficits" due to social inequality. Autonomy and vulnerability are not seen as opposites, but the subject is conceived as both autonomous and vulnerable, as "human persons are both" (Mackenzie, Rogers, & Dodds, 2014, p. 16).

A socio-relational understanding of autonomy holds social and institutional institutions accountable for the way and extent to which they promote or impede the autonomy of individuals or groups. This brings two further lines of difference in the current discourse on the philosophy of education into view: firstly, it foregrounds the question of the extent to which educational actors and institutions may be guided by a defined idea of a good and autonomous life, i.e., pursue a perfectionist concept of autonomy. And secondly, it highlights the problem of paternalism, i.e., the controversy as to whether and to what extent those to be educated can be forced to do something they do not want at the moment with regard to their future well-being (cf. Baumann, 2008).

With these two controversial questions, the differences that had already come to light with Kant's paradox are repeated. While the pedagogical classics from Rousseau to Dewey advocate a perfectionist pedagogy and a paternalistic approach, the contemporary pedagogical discourse is rather cautious and reserved towards paternalism and perfectionism (Drerup, 2016a). This places it in the realm of libertarian or neoliberal positions, which conceive of autonomy exclusively in negative terms and are neutral with regard to a positive determination of a good and self-determined life (Christman, 2004). However, such an abstinent position is problematic as it has no instruments at its disposal to evaluate the legitimacy of different autonomy regimes. Following this line of thinking, it disbands an understanding of autonomy as an all-or-nothing issue. Rather, it calls for examining pedagogical arrangements in terms of their degree of appropriation (Drerup, 2015, p. 75) and evaluating them in relation to their objectives. This would have to be based on a concept of autonomy that is not only socio-relationally conceived but integrates both negative and positive dimensions of freedom. It would therefore be a matter of being able to justify theoretically, empirically, and normatively why one particular pedagogical autonomy regime is preferable to another (Drerup, 2016b, p. 137).

## Translations of the concepts of autonomy into educational reform approaches

Educational reform approaches that centrally build on the idea of learner autonomy by presupposing the autonomy of the subject (Wrana, 2008, p. 31) are not at all a new phenomenon. Already at the turn of the 20th century, autonomy-oriented educational settings, termed "progressive education" in the USA, *Reformpädagogik* in German, *éducation nouvelle* in France, "child-centred", or "new education" in the UK blossomed (Idel & Ullrich, 2017). These approaches to reform are related to illustrious pedagogues, such as John Dewey, Helen Parkhust, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Ellen Key, Paul Geheeb, Rudolf Steiner, Célestin and Élise Freinet, Alexander Neill, and many others. A popular view romanticizes these founding figures as theoretical and practical innovators who challenged the educational establishment and

the autonomy paradox of education (Oelkers, 2010). These rather heterogeneous reforms were united by their concerns with the active child and its interests, pupil autonomy and self-government, a less coercive teacher-pupil relationship, and democracy (ibid.; Wagnon & Patry, 2019; Patry, 2018).[2]

In the course of the emancipatory counter-cultural movements of the post-1968 period, child-centred education and alternative, antiauthoritarian, democratic schools and deschooling experienced a new upswing (Hartley, 2009). In addition, new approaches to autonomy-oriented learning settings emerged that also were inspired by the emancipative spirit of the 1970s. Following the earlier reform pedagogy, autonomy-oriented approaches (to this day) take a critical stance towards "traditional" and "authoritarian" pedagogy. Through this stereotyping of diverse and historically changing practices in classrooms, discursive fields of alternative and innovative autonomy-oriented pedagogical approaches are enacted. They are supported by constructivist theories of learning that emphasize learning as an active process in which learners construct new knowledge based on prior experiences and social interaction (Fosnot, 2013). These approaches are not only advanced by alternative private schools but have also been absorbed by public schools. The following brief reconstruction of the recent concepts of autonomy-oriented learning identifies distinct traditions and outlines the inherent understandings of the self and autonomy.

Concepts of autonomy-oriented classroom settings in public schools such as "self-regulated", "self-directed", "autonomous", "self-organized", and "personalized" learning centre on "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Therewith, the autonomy-oriented approaches conceive autonomy not only as a goal but establish it as a central means of classroom practice. This means that autonomy is no longer delegated to the future, as an outcome of education, but is to be achieved and performed during everyday routines in the classroom.

Although the autonomy-oriented learning concepts increasingly show overlapping features, they have different roots and backgrounds: "self-regulated", "self-directed", and "autonomous" learning emerged, along with lifelong learning (Field, 2006), in the field of adult education during the 1970s and were shaped by the emancipative counterculture. In contrast, "personalized" learning was propagated in the early 2000s as a neoliberal political strategy (Mincu, 2012).

The concept of autonomous learning was initiated by the "Council of Europe's Modern Language Project" and enjoys still lively debates on (foreign) language teaching (Benson, 2007). Self-directed learning was propagated as an emancipatory approach in US adult education in the 1970s; it revolved around the idea of a learning contract between teachers and students (Knowles, 1975; Servant-Miklos & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2021). Approaches to self-regulated learning started with cognitive-behavioural studies in educational psychology

in the 1970s and focus on the meta-cognitive, motivational, and behavioural processes to improve learning (Schunk & Greene, 2018a). One major distinction between these approaches is whether their goal is predominantly a technical optimization of the learning process or whether their primary orientation is emancipation. In approaches to self-regulated learning, the implicit autonomy concept is restricted to the control of one's behaviour and the regulation of the learning process (Boekearts, 1999). In contrast, proponents of autonomous learning and self-directed learning weave didactical techniques with empowerment and social transformation: the understanding of autonomy includes setting the agenda and determining the content of learning (Brookfield, 1993; Little, 1991). While models of self-regulated, self-directed, or autonomous learning started with a focus on the individual learner, they gradually included a socio-relational perspective in order to take social embeddedness and cultural differences into account (Benson, 2007; Brookfield, 2009, p. 2620; Candy, 1991; Schunk & Greene, 2018b).

"Personalized learning" was one of the central ideas propagandized by the New Labour Government to restructure English secondary schools in the early 2000s (Mincu, 2012). Personalization policies aimed at raising standards and educational outcomes by focusing on individual aptitudes and interests: the policy demands involved the tracking of students' individual performance data, the adaptation of teaching to individual needs, paces and styles of learning, curricular choices, the improvement of teaching capacities, teacher cooperation and community support (Miliband, 2006). The autonomy concepts inherent in personalized learning are related to "choice" and "voice", turning students into co-producing consumers (Hartley, 2012). Although it is at least questionable how far personalized learning changed classroom practices in English schools (Maguire, Ball, & Braun, 2013), the concept was propagated by the OECD (2006) and has become part of a globalized educational reform discourse (Beach & Dovemark, 2009; Reusser et al., 2018).

With accelerated digitalization and the ubiquity of personal computers, personalized and other autonomy-oriented learning concepts have recently profited from an additional boost (Bingham, Pane, Steiner, & Hamilton, 2018). Digitally enhanced personalized learning settings break the spatial-temporal matrix of the classroom and extend it into an open learning environment (Shemshack & Spector, 2020). Under the digital condition (Stalder, 2018), autonomy-oriented learning is associated with competencies such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity (Romero & Barberà, 2014). In digitalized learning environments, the expectations of learner autonomy increase. The "self-organized learning environment" by Mitra & Dangwal (2010), for example, that propagates digitally supported, self-organized learning largely without instruction reaches far beyond the usual autonomy-oriented classroom setting under teacher guidance.

This brief and sketchy overview tried to acknowledge distinct educational and scholarly traditions. In the meantime, the once distinct concepts have

largely become detached from their original domains and are often used synonymously. The different terms have merged into a powerful discourse of autonomy-oriented learning, which is globally propagated through educational policies, curricula and teacher education, and which, finally, spreads through the classrooms of public schools. Autonomous learning has become a catch-all concept that can be filled as one sees fit by linking it to ideals of reform pedagogy or liberal concepts of autonomy, to cybernetic processes of self-regulation or the autonomous citizen. The notion might be directed to cognitive aspects of learning or behaviour and might address the goals of education or rather its condition and instruments. Despite these largely positive associations within the current educational debate, the discourse causes fervid criticism.

## Critique of autonomy-oriented learning environments

Critical analyses of current autonomy-oriented approaches question their transformative emancipatory potential (Leroy, 2022). Instead of providing a freedom-emphasizing antipode to hierarchical teaching methods, autonomy-oriented learning approaches are adapting pedagogical practices to current governing and economic regimes; thereby, their autonomy concept is shaped by "a permanent oscillation between self- and external control, between freedom and subjugation" (Wrana, 2008, p. 43; our translation). From a poststructuralist perspective, the *dispositif* of the autonomous learner is criticized for its inherent conception of the self-empowered subject as a powerful instrument of government (Simons & Masschelein, 2008). The subject of the autonomous learner "is fabricated not by strategies of surveillance and punishment, but by activating its self-directing potential" (Bröckling, 2007, p. 61; our translation). This perspective exposes autonomous learning as a seductive framework that highlights its emancipatory potential and promises to liberate students from the disciplinary classroom while fostering the self-governing individual as an efficient exercise of power (Peters, 2012; Simons, 2020; Vassallo, 2015). Its conception of autonomy is criticized as being part and parcel of the molecular government of New Public Management (NPM) that transforms control into self-control (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). In this vein, the *dispositif* is in line with other NPM policies, such as school autonomy installed as a (self-)governing imperative in many countries around the world (Wermke & Salokangas, 2015).

Current approaches to autonomous learning are suspected of subverting pedagogical ideals of justice. It seems that the promise of equality by adapting education to the individual needs of each learner intensifies competition within the classroom (Beach & Dovemark, 2009). Inclusion then produces the social background against which the individual distinctions between learners – concerning competences and speed – are accentuated. The multiplication of personalized programmes and categories of distinction, such as "special educational needs", results in the fragmentation and hierarchization of the school's

social body (Frandji & Rochex, 2011; Garcia, 2019). Rather than fostering equality, personalized learning and individualization of education are blamed for reinforcing inequalities (Beach, 2017). With a concern for the reproduction of inequality by and through education, autonomous learning is accused of corresponding to the cultural codes of the middle class and of supporting their children, while deprived children are further disadvantaged (Sertl, 2007). The Covid-19 pandemic showed drastically to what extent pupil autonomy is structured by social inequality: the sudden school closures during the pandemic with the interrupted, or at least impeded, communication between school and families, and the impossibility of constant teacher control, virtually threw students back on their capacities and resources to act as autonomous learners. However, research showed that access to teachers, internet connection, and learning devices, as well as parental support and the motivation for autonomous learning, have been unequally distributed (Conus & Durler, 2022; Delès, Pirone & Rayou, 2021; Reimers, 2022). The pandemic also made painfully obvious that educational institutions cannot be reduced to spaces of learning, but that they are important locations to feel integrated, to build friendships, and to develop social identities.

From the perspective of a critical pedagogy, the *dispositif* inevitably fails in its emancipatory claims because, unlike e.g., Freire's approach, it does not link learning to visions of social transformation (Servant-Miklos & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2021). Rather than addressing democratic concerns and wider social questions, autonomous learning reveals its ahistorical and technicist preoccupation with "what works" (Fielding, 2012). More generally, autonomous learning is criticized as part of the "learnification" of education (Biesta, 2015) that empties education of content, purpose, and social relations. The *dispositif* deprives the school of its essential public character – namely, to provide education as a collective good shared publicly in the classroom (Masschelein & Simons, 2013).

The authors of the contributions in this book follow in different ways these critical perspectives. However, they do not enter the chorus of a general critique of the *dispositif*, which itself might be accused of evoking an undifferentiated discourse of autonomous learning. Rather, the contributions engage a critical perspective for a careful empirical analysis in order to better understand what is being done in the name of autonomy. They provide a thorough analysis of how educational institutions in three neighbouring European countries engage with autonomy-oriented learning settings and what challenges they face in their endeavours. They ask what kind of educational practices are generated by the *dispositif* in concrete contexts: how are specific autonomy-oriented settings organized? In what situations is the autonomy of students addressed and challenged? How do teachers engage in fostering the autonomy of different students? How do students deal with the demands of autonomy-oriented settings? What are the intended and unintended consequences of

educational devices that strive to enhance the autonomy of students? They also evaluate the legitimacy of the autonomy regimes and scrutinize the forms of autonomy generated and the outcomes that derive from it. Thus, the contributions offer fine-grained analyses of how the autonomous learner is fabricated in particular locations and under specific conditions.

## Ignorant neighbours: Francophone and Germanophone research traditions

Even though located in neighbouring countries, research in education in French- and German-speaking countries is conspicuously separated by language differences. Despite the geographical proximity, research exchanges only rarely bridge this boundary. As a consequence, researchers are largely ignorant of the debates, theoretical orientations, and empirical insights of their colleagues across the language barrier. This is even so within Switzerland, where the "*Röstigraben*"[3] (despite its decreasing importance in political questions) still largely divides the research practices between the German-speaking areas and the Romandie, each side being predominantly oriented towards the debates of their own linguistic universes. This mutual disregard of the Francophone and the Germanophone research communities results in a widespread ignorance of the similarities and distinctions of their respective educational practices in classrooms. In both linguistic contexts, there are specific labels for autonomy-oriented settings – such as "self-organized learning" in German-speaking Switzerland, "open(ed) classroom" (*offener/geöffneter Unterricht*) in Germany, and recently, *classes flexibles* in the Francophone areas. Far beyond such labelling employed for profiling schools, autonomy-oriented didactical practices spread through "ordinary" classrooms of public schools in all three countries.

The aim of this book is to bring research on autonomy-promoting learning settings from the Francophone and Germanophone tradition into dialogue. The contributions collected in this volume are based on an international conference held in January 2021 at the University of Teacher Education in Bern. The theme and title of the conference emerged in the context of the editors' joint research project, which was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation as a cooperation between the Universities of Teacher Education in Bern and Lausanne.[4] The bilingual and thus intercultural orientation of the project was also reflected in the nationality of the conference participants: the conference brought together researchers from Switzerland, France, Austria, and Germany and thus made for exchanges not only across national but also across discursive and cultural borders. To make such dialogue possible, we favoured perspectives that show a certain proximity in their theoretical and methodological orientations. The contributions assembled in the book offer unique insights into the distinctions, similarities, transmissions, and parallel developments in schools and classrooms in the three neighbouring countries.

Besides, they account for the different theoretical concepts, research interests, methodological approaches of two research communities which rarely meet.

Despite their distinct, culture-specific backgrounds, both the Francophone and the Germanophone share a similar research habitus. They all are based on an extensive, ethnographic research strategy. With one exception, the contributions draw on long-term participant observation, which is supplemented by ethnographic interviewing and document analysis. They thus insist on a field approach that distances itself from the dominant reform discourse. Instead of looking for practical conditions for successful autonomous learning, the aim is rather to describe the various manifestations of this form of learning and also to look at the unintended side effects. All contributions are interested in the sociality of learning, i.e., they scrutinize the structures that condition the interactions and the social differentiations resulting from autonomy-oriented learning.

Theoretically and disciplinarily, the contributions are linked to different reference systems. While the Francophone contributions tend to be located in sociology, the majority of the Germanophone contributions are positioned within education, although sociologically-informed. And although both traditions ultimately go back to Bourdieu's praxeology, they accentuate different aspects of his theory. In the context of the Germanophone discourse, a "didactically interested ethnographic classroom research" (Breidenstein, 2009, p. 210) developed, which mostly pursue a practice-theoretical approach. Here – starting with Bourdieu – a variety of theoretical threads have been woven into a theory of social practices (Reckwitz, 2003). Wittgenstein's language game theory, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, the governmentality of the late Foucault, and Judith Butler's performance theory all function as building blocks for the formation of a theory of social practices. As travelling concepts (Bal, 2002), they migrate into practice theory and shed new light on the objects under investigation.

With regard to the research subjects that have been worked on so far in the Germanophone educational ethnography, we would like to highlight the following topics: dimensions of space and time in individualized settings (Breidenstein & Rademacher, 2013; Reh & Berdelmann, 2012), student self-assessments and feedback practices (Breidenstein, 2018; Rabenstein, 2017), the school class and its meaning for individualization (Rabenstein, Idel, Reh, & Ricken, 2018), practices of doing difference (Rabenstein, 2010), or the shift of power relations in the context of "guidance to self-guidance" (Rose, 2016).

The contributions of the French-speaking authors activate key themes in the tradition of the Francophone sociology of education, focusing on the reproduction of social inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964, 1970), on the social aspects of learning and knowledge transmission (Deauvieau & Terrail, 2007), or the articulation between didactics and sociology (Lahire, 2007; Losego, 2014). While the current Germanophone practice-theoretical

perspective addressed earlier often discusses the complex relation between social processes and individual autonomy in terms of subjectivation, the Francophone authors in this volume privilege the term *socialisation*: from the sociology of socialization, autonomy is not an individual characteristic but dependent on the individual's social background and thus related to complex socialization processes (Darmon, 2006; Lahire, 1998). Therewith, this perspective is (much more than the Germanophone one) interested in the transfer of dispositions from one context to another (from family to school, for example), and it highlights the tensions, adaptations, and contradictions experienced by the actors of these different socializing experiences. Indeed, if the Francophone focus on inequality largely remains influenced by the thesis of the "reproductive school" on the macro-sociological level, recent research that is influenced by interactionist sociology (cf. Queiroz (de) & Ziolovski, 1994; Payet, 2016) aims to open up the "black box" of the classroom to examine empirically the genesis of these inequalities and the subjects that are produced (Millet & Croizet, 2016). This research perspective is increasingly addressing the subject of autonomy. Specifically, several contributions refer their discussion of learner autonomy to the work of the British socio-linguist Basil Bernstein, whose theoretical perspectives favour the articulation between school, family, language, curricula, pedagogy, and social class. With his "horizontal discourse", Bernstein (2007) addresses a convivial and participatory teaching approach that relates knowledge to the students' everyday world, while his "vertical discourse" refers to a hierarchically and coherently structured knowledge whose access, transmission, and evaluation is governed by explicit rules. Furthermore, Bernstein's theoretical distinctions – between strong and weak forms of classification or framing, as well as between visible and invisible pedagogies – are useful as well to analyse classroom practices and the forms of enacted knowledge. Another orientation of the Francophone contributions is Bernard Lahire's (2001) distinction between cognitive and political autonomy: while the former is limited to school learning and its organization, the latter is oriented towards the autonomous citizen and refers to, e.g., practices of collective negotiation of rules or the setting up of student councils for discussion of life at school.

Beyond their being embedded in different theoretical research traditions, the contributions are united by their focus on social practices and thus on the everyday routines and interactions that emerge in autonomy-promoting educational settings. With this perspective, they elaborate on the orders of knowledge and culturally shaped symbolic structures that underpin these learning arrangements. By juxtaposing the contributions from distinct linguistic and cultural contexts, our ambition is to open up opportunities for dialogue and debate, to examine the kinship and distinctions between conceptual frameworks.

## Contributions

In the first section of this volume, we present contributions that examine how pedagogical practices in preschool education, kindergarten, and primary schools promote autonomy and what effects can be observed. Preschool education is called *école maternelle* in France and covers three years for children aged three to six. The following contributions show how preschool education in France, more than in neighbouring countries, advocates academic learning. Informed by Basil Bernstein's sociology of education, *Ariane Richard-Bossez* compares two types of pedagogical arrangements in the last year of the *école maternelle*: the so-called autonomous workshops and individual Montessori-type activities. Her investigation highlights two main processes: firstly, the weak cognitive framing of activities and the limited possibilities of scaffolding that result from it, and secondly, the accentuation of social distinctions in terms of exposure to academic knowledge in the case of Montessori-type activities. She concludes that these processes tend to close off the possibilities of acquiring learning for pupils who have not already mastered it because of their previous school or family learning.

*Fabienne Montmasson-Michel* also focuses on the connection between social inequality and the autonomy *dispositif* in the *école maternelle*. Her study explores a method used in France since the 1980s to promote literacy in kindergarten (in the third year of the *école maternelle*): by the so-called *écriture inventée*, young children are supposed to learn the alphabetic code from the practice and reflective analysis of their spontaneous writings. By confronting the socio-historical reconstruction of the *dispositif* with her ethnographic observations, she is able to highlight the difficulties and unintended effects of the *dispositif*. Her results also show how the method of *écriture inventée* does not eliminate the existing unequal literacy resources but rather reinforces social inequality.

In their contribution, *Julien Netter* and *Christophe Joigneaux* differentiate Bernard Lahire's distinction between cognitive (related to knowledge) and political (related to discipline and behaviour) autonomy pedagogy. In their comparison of two teachers in the *école maternelle*, who use the same autonomy-promoting instruments in different ways, the authors show the diverse effects on pupils' autonomy that can be attributed to concrete pedagogical practices. They, therefore, argue for increased attention to the influences of concrete teaching practices and to consider different forms of the "pedagogy of autonomy" and its particular links to learning inequalities.

In multigrade primary classes, teachers are confronted with the expectation of using individualizing and autonomy-promoting teaching settings. Much like Julien Netter and Christophe Joigneaux, *Laura Weidmann* and *Ursula Fiechter* compared the autonomy-promoting teaching methods and the underlying autonomy concepts of two teachers in two multigrade classes. In one of the presented cases, autonomy is seen as a working method; in the other case,

autonomy is understood as the development of knowledge and skills, which are gradually acquired by the pupils of the multigrade classroom. These different understandings of autonomy by the teachers not only lead to different pedagogical interventions, but they also serve as criteria for their evaluation and assessment.

Finally, *Jeanne Rey* analyses mindfulness practice and training in a Swiss international school in the light of a Foucauldian "technology of the self". Her analysis shows how mindfulness meditation positions the pupils in relation to their thoughts, sensations, and emotions and as self-agents of their learning. This reflective way to frame autonomy echoes the specific microcosm to which the school belongs – namely, an "educational cosmopolitan enclave" where children of diplomats and CEOs mingle with local elites before moving to other destinations across the globe.

The contributions in the second section examine how teachers in secondary schools lead students towards autonomy. The first chapter by Héloïse *Durler* and *Crispin Girinshuti* analyses fieldwork during an autonomy-oriented project in mathematics by two teachers of mathematics in a lower secondary school in Switzerland. The analysis discusses how the two teachers leading the project engage different strategies of "mobilization" through forms of confrontation by which the teachers aim to bring students to take responsibility for their learning. The analysis shows how during the process, the initial freedom granted to students and their empowerment is increasingly restricted and contradicted by pressures and obligations. The authors interpret the emerging contradictions with reference to a conception of autonomy that overlooks the resources (cognitive, behavioural, etc.) needed for autonomous learning in the classroom.

*Regula Fankhauser*, *Judith Hangartner*, and *Ditjola Naço* examine self-reflection as a pedagogical practice that is highlighted in the context of autonomous learning in a lower secondary school. On the theoretical background of reflexive modernity and with a practice-theoretical perspective they analyse the use of two different reflection tools in an autonomy-oriented secondary school in Switzerland. While one instrument leads to ritualized, formulaic confessions, the second instrument reveals at least the beginnings of authentic self-reflection. In their conclusion, they consider the conditions under which the objective of reflection could emerge.

Group work is considered a promising option to foster the autonomy of students. *Patrick Rayou* and *Marie-Sylvie Claude* put this belief to the test and investigated group work in a French class (nineth grade) in a secondary school in Paris. They base their ethnographic study on the didactical theory of contract pedagogy. It can be concluded from their analysis that group work strengthens the social and the educational contract. In contrast, the didactic contract does not, as intended, enable all students to become autonomous readers, capable of turning the reading of literature into an authentic experience of personal development.

In the last contribution of this section, *Stéphane Vaquero* analyses the distinct forms of autonomy granted to pupils in the context of self-directed projects called *Travaux Personnels Encadrés* in French secondary schools. This setting demands students to find a personal question about a topic of their own choice, to conduct a research process, and to present their findings. Referring to Bernsteins' theory of horizontal and vertical discourses (termed "devices" here), the author points out that students with lower cultural capital are left on their own, while those with higher cultural capital rather attract the interest and support of their supervisors. The contribution discusses how the horizontal devices contribute to establishing distinctive signs of what teachers call "autonomy" and how they tend to reproduce the scholastic and social distribution of cultural capital.

The third section thematizes autonomy in the context of educational reforms such as inclusion and digitalization. *Laurent Bovey*'s contribution is oriented towards the sociology of special education. Applying an interactionist perspective, he shows how in special education classes autonomy works as a criterion in order to gauge whether or not to reorient students. Autonomy is understood in a narrow sense and serves as a "gold standard" for promoting students to return to ordinary classes or to relegate them to separate classes. He concludes that this situation highlights a paradox: while the school advocates student autonomy, it is unable to relinquish its role in controlling and monitoring students.

*Thorsten Merl* is also dedicated to student autonomy in an inclusive context. In his ethnography, he analyses performed expectations of autonomy in inclusive secondary schools. Based on theoretical perspectives of Disability Studies and Studies in Ableism, he shows three ways by which the ideal of individual autonomy is maintained: by hiding external influences on abilities, by allowing deviation for some students, and by explaining ongoing deviations with disabilities.

*Mario Steinberg* and *Yannick Schmid* focus on the figure of the autonomous learner in the context of digitalization in education. According to a widespread assumption, digitalization supports and promotes autonomous learning. The chapter examines how different educational actors assess the importance of digitalization for autonomous learning. The analysis, which is theoretically framed by the sociology of conventions, shows the broad spectrum between doubts and utopias that different school actors attribute to technology-based learning in relation to autonomy in classrooms.

### Notes

1  "How am I to develop the sense of freedom in spite of the restraint?" (own translation).
2  In contrast to the reform approaches in the neighbouring countries, the German *Reformpädagogik* focused on the notion of community, which was shaped by nationalist influences (Oelkers, 2010).

3 *Rösti* is the Swiss-German name for a dish made of fried, grated potatoes; the term *Röstigraben* is commonly used as a metaphor to highlight not only the linguistic but also the cultural and political distinctions between the Francophone and the Germanphone areas of Switzerland.

4 The conference entitled "The Dispositive of Autonomy in the Learning Society – *Konstruktionen des selbstständigen Bildungssubjekts – La fabrique de l'individu autonome et ses contextes éducatifs*" was held online, January 27/28, 2021. It was part of our joint research project funded by the SNSF, Project Nr 100019_173035, entitled "*Führung zur Selbstführung – Eine ethnografische Studie zu schulischen Settings des selbstständigen Lernens*" (2017–2022).

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