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# The Origins of the Contemporary Responsibility of Children for Their Own Cleanliness. A Sociological Analysis of French Nursery Schools

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## **The Origins of the Contemporary Responsibility of Children for Their Own Cleanliness. A Sociological Analysis of French Nursery Schools**

*Ghislain Leroy\**

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*Abstract:* This article takes as its subject representations of children's cleanliness in the context of French écoles maternelles (nursery schools). It combines the sociology of childhood, the sociology of education and the sociology of health. Comparisons are made between official texts, inspection reports and professional practices. Three phases can be identified. In the first (1826-1939), the priority was to take responsibility for children's health and hygiene in a context in which the rules on cleanliness and the fight to improve health and sanitary conditions were being redefined. In the second phase (1945-1986), the écoles maternelles to some extent relegated this direct responsibility for children's health and cleanliness to the background in favour of a more psychological relationship in a context in which ideas on education were changing. In the third phase (from 1986 to the present day), children gradually became responsible for their own health and cleanliness. Direct observation has shown that adults now maintain a certain distance from or even eschew responsibility for children's bodies and the care thereof.

*Keywords:* cleanliness, health, child, body

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## Introduction

From the statutory norms on hygiene applied to the construction of the *salles d'asile*<sup>1</sup> (Luc, 1982, p. 74) to the removal of head lice in nursery schools today, there would appear to be a profound continuity in the responsibility for hygiene assigned to French nursery schools. In fact, the *salles d'asile* were set up in part for that purpose, as were other institutions for young children (Bouve, 2001). For all that, attitudes towards the cleanliness of children in nursery schools and the related practices have evolved over the course of this long period, which stretches from 1826 (when the first *salle d'asile* was set up in Paris) to the present day. The present article sets out to examine this evolution, taking into account both the official texts as previous studies have done (Leroy, 2017) as well as the actual implementation of norms and directives. It also aims to bring to light the nature and singularity of contemporary practices associated with children's cleanliness.

This study takes as its theoretical framework the sociology of childhood in both its French (Sirota, 2006) and English-language variants (Lee, 2001; Turmel, 2008). This field of research seeks to understand the changes in the representations of children and of the adult/child relationship, taking as its starting point the observation that they evolve as the wider society evolves. We take up a concept that has emerged within this field, namely that of the 'figure of the child' (Hamelin Brabant & Turmel, 2012), in order to identify heterogeneous representations of childhood, each having a certain unity and a relative identity in time. Adopting an approach based on the theories developed by Luc Boltanski (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991), these 'figures of the child' can be considered as higher-order normative principles to which actors refer in order to establish a particular kind of relationship with children. Each figure of the child embodies a specific representation of children (and a way of behaving towards them) as well as a certain notion of the adult/child relationship. Each figure of the child has a certain diachronic coherence while it also evolves over time. The figures of the

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<sup>1</sup> The *salles d'asile* were the forerunners of the *écoles maternelles* in France, taking in working-class children aged 3 to 6. For clarity's sake, the term has been left untranslated. From 1836, the Ministry of Public Education takes the control of the "salles d'asile" and makes the "dames patronesses" responsible for organizing the management.

child conflict and compete with each other, while sometimes also becoming superimposed and interlinked (Leroy, 2017) because of the multiple social facts that can be brought to light by sociological analysis.

Our aim is to reconstruct an historical sociology of the links between nursery schools and what we will call here the '*figure of the clean child*'. We will set it alongside the *figure of the child as pupil*, to which we have devoted other studies (Leroy, forthcoming – a) and which also characterised the *salles d'asile* from their very beginnings. Investigation of the connections between them (conflicts, interconnections etc.) proves to be a particularly valuable heuristic tool for understanding the evolution of the figure of the clean child through the period under investigation. Through the very choice of these objects of investigation, we will seek to link the sociology of education with the sociologies of health and of body surveillance (Armstrong, 1995; Foucault, 1963, 1975) by considering them in terms of the connections and interdependencies between them (sociology of childhood). Finally, we will draw on the findings of anthropology and ethnology, in the knowledge that the question of the representations and social practices associated with cleanliness and excrement is one of the objects of investigation in those disciplines.

## **Methodology**

Our investigation will cover the period from 1826 to 2013, the date on which our observations ended. This historical sociology will examine and compare material from three sources: official texts, professional practice and inspection reports. The inspection reports can be situated as an 'intermediate' level between the official documentation and professional practices, following the example of the teaching manuals (Marchand, 1971). The analysis gains in refinement by investigating the interactions and discrepancies between the official documentation and the inspection reports and between the inspection reports and professional practices.

From a methodological perspective, all of the directives relating to *salles d'asile* and nursery schools have been analysed using Jean-Noël Luc's work (Luc, 1982), which compiles all those for the period 1829-1981. For the subsequent period, we shall refer mainly (though not exclusively) to official instructions and curricula. Contemporary practices will be reconstructed on the basis of 50 days of direct observation in French

nursery schools carried out between 2011 and 2013. All the observations were conducted in Paris by myself (1 single observer). I was able to observe teachers of various social backgrounds, ages, experience and gender (3 men). Thirty-one days of observation were spent in education priority zones, 13 in comfortably-off neighbourhoods and 6 in neighbourhoods somewhere in between. We observed classes in the young (2-4 year olds), intermediate (4-5 year olds) and older (5-6 year olds) sections<sup>2</sup>. In order to examine contemporary representations of children's cleanliness, we trained our gaze on a multiplicity of objects: display materials and objects linked to hygiene, the way in which adults inhabit spaces linked to hygiene (toilets in particular), the place of activities linked to cleanliness compared with those with a more obviously didactic purpose. A group interview was conducted with all the children in one of the observed classes (4-5 year olds) in which their relationship to the school's toilets was discussed. Our study focused principally on the (mainly female) nursery school teachers but we also gathered data on the behaviour of the classroom assistants (*agent spécialisé des écoles maternelles* or ASEM), who play an important role in managing the cleanliness of the premises and the children. Thus contemporary practices were investigated at first hand through the use of the methodological instrument of direct observation. Practices in the past will be described more indirectly. For the period 1826-1939, we will draw on historical studies pertaining to the *salles d'asile* and nursery schools of the Third Republic (Dajez, 1994; Luc, 1982, 1997). We ourselves will analyse some little-known historical documents (Calmy-Guyot, 1973) to shed light on some examples of professional practice for the period 1945-1986. The use of these indirect sources will not enable us to resolve all the questions posed here but will provide some data crucial to our attempts to reconstruct the sociological developments under investigation here.

Finally, for the inspection reports, the method used was as follows: we have 134 inspection reports on nursery school classes in our possession, divided into 6 corpora, covering the follow periods: 1934-1939 (5 reports), 1940-1952 (30 reports), 1955-1960 (25 reports), 1965-1970 (25 reports), 1975-1980 (25 reports), and 2000-2010 (24 reports<sup>3</sup>). Thus for the period

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<sup>2</sup> French nursery schools cater for 100% of children from 3 to 6 years of age.

<sup>3</sup> The inspection reports for the period 1945-1980 are those analysed by Eric Plaisance in 1986, in his classic work, *L'enfant, la maternelle, la société* (Plaisance, 1986). Eric

prior to 1939 we have only 5 reports, which is very few. This being the case, we will draw on these reports and on some of those examined by Jean-Noël Luc (Luc, 1997) in order to propose some avenues for further investigation. For all the reports, the passages relating to hygiene and cleanliness have been counted and analysed; the topics addressed include definitions of ‘dirty’ and ‘clean’, toilets, washbasins, hand washing, nose blowing etc.

### **1826-1939<sup>4</sup>: children’s hygiene is a priority objective**

In the early 19th century, a new sense of collective responsibility emerges with regard to personal hygiene, which is descended from the previous century (Jacquin, 1762; Tissot, 1761). This feeling may be linked to an extension of “biopower”, i.e. to a change in social control (Foucault, 1975). The *figure of the clean child* is that of a child who matches the representations of cleanliness emerging in the 19th century (cleanliness of private parts, washed skin, etc.) and will soon be inextricably linked with a scientific approach to hygiene (Vigarello, 1985). Its image contrasts with that of the dirty child, who is associated with a disorderliness that is not only moral and medical (Douglas, 1966; Vigarello, 1985, pp. 245-246), but also social. Cleanliness was seen as a way of controlling, or even regenerating (Bouve, 2010, p. 158; Luc, 1997, pp. 48-51) the proletariat.

The figure of the clean child emerges from the official texts of the *salles d’asile*, which make these establishments a place of exemplary cleanliness (Luc, 1982, p. 74), inspected by doctors (Luc, 1982, p. 77). The environment within the *asile* is defined as being at odds with the world

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Plaisance kindly donated these reports to me, together with a number of others that he had not used (these form our 1934-1939 corpus and part of the 1940-1952 corpus). The 2000-2010 corpus was compiled by myself, and has already been the subject of a study (Leroy, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> 1826 is the date when the first *salle d’asile* was established. 1939 marked the beginning of the Second World War. We shall see that thereafter, a great many sociological factors bring about a change in the relationships of the child figures studied here (at nursery school), which is why the date of 1939 has been chosen to mark the end of this period of history. The difference, as studied below, between the 1934-1939 corpus of inspection reports and the 1940-1952 corpus is therefore an argument for defining this particular period of history in this way, by bringing it to a close in 1939. However, we find a relative institutional silence (Luc, 2010) in terms of official documentation from 1937 onwards, through to 1977.

outside, which is regarded as dirty and dangerous (Leroy, 2017; Luc, 1982, p. 53). This is the figure of a child that adults want to train to “acquire habits (...) of cleanliness” (Luc, 1982, p. 61), by lavishing advice on it relating to personal hygiene (Luc, 1982, p. 81), both for its personal benefit and so that the child can pass this advice on at home. This figure of the clean child is therefore partly linked to an adult figure who is a role-model in terms of personal hygiene: the *asile* staff member (Luc, 1982, p. 81). Many official documents mention an inspection of a child’s cleanliness at the time of its arrival (Luc, 1982, p. 76, 114), which enables the personal hygiene behaviours and standards set by the parents to be altered. This figure of the clean child also emerges from the personal hygiene and sanitation standards (Luc, 1982, p. 74), and from initiatives that were supposed to be implemented in the construction of *asiles*, such as large circular zinc washbasins (Luc, 1997, p. 203).

In the official texts of the *salles d’asile*, this figure of the clean child co-exists with that of a child-as-pupil. It is the figure of a child that the educators want to mould, in such a way that it leaves behind its original nature, seen as disorderly and linked to passions, and instead adopts a behaviour characterised by discipline and concentration, and thus learn prescribed behaviours, by following impersonal school rules (Vincent, 1980). As early as 1833, one official text links the *salles d’asile* with school. Their goal is “*to commence instruction from the earliest age*”. Accordingly they are said to form “*the first level of primary education*”, such that they might be called “*infants’ schools*” (Luc, 1982, p. 57). During a reading of the official documentation, the description of the lessons, which is initially brief, becomes more sophisticated. The emergence of this figure in the official documentation of the *salle d’asile* may be linked to the changed view of childhood that springs up during the 19th century, a period that was particularly attentive to the young child’s abilities (Luc, 1997).

These two child figures remain highly influential in the official documentation of the Third Republic, i.e. of the nursery school (created in 1881). Many themes linked to cleanliness and personal hygiene are to be found here: inspections of children as they enter the school gates, edification of the parents, learning the rules of personal hygiene, and standards of hygiene and cleanliness in building construction (Leroy, 2017; Luc, 1982). Moreover, an increasing level of importance is accorded to personal hygiene and cleanliness in the training given to schoolmistresses (Luc, 1982, p. 198). Particular importance is placed on personal hygiene

goals in the early 20th century, due to the rise of Pasteurism and infant care. Even though one of the two child figures sometimes gains the upper hand over the other, overall they are accorded equal importance in the official documentation throughout this period (1826-1939).

As far as inspection reports are concerned, we are not in possession of any reports dating back further than 1934. Having said that, Jean-Noël Luc cites a number of *salle d'asile* inspection reports that discuss the issue of cleanliness (Luc, 1997, p. 458<sup>5</sup>). Incidentally, an analysis of our corpus of inspection reports shows that, in the 1934-1939 corpus, issues linked to cleanliness frequently appear. No fewer than 4 of the 5 reports from the 1930s discuss these matters. Here are a few extracts:

Personal hygiene – Children taken to the washroom at regular intervals. Pocket handkerchiefs inspected. Permanent ventilation maintained. Good<sup>6</sup>. Children taken to the toilets and washrooms in orderly fashion – children fairly clean, overall. Staff take care to ensure that they acquire good habits; the matron is hard-working, and an expert who receives good guidance from the schoolmistress<sup>7</sup>.

The personal hygiene activities are somewhat slow: they ought to start five minutes earlier so that everyone can be ready by nine o'clock, both the older and the younger pupils. (...) And, to conclude with the subject of personal hygiene, the children's hands are the only parts of their body that are attended to, whereas a few nails, one or two little faces and the knees... all merit special attention<sup>8</sup>.

The picture that emerges from these passages is that of a nursery schoolmistress who is responsible for the cleanliness of all the children in her class, and is actively involved in this task. The cleanliness inspections are communal: the adults take the children to the washroom and wash them (not just their hands). The themes of washing children's hands, going to the washroom are mentioned in 19th century official documentation (Leroy, 2017), and we may therefore assume that where inspector concerns with personal hygiene appear in these 1930s reports, they represent continuity

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding the question of cleanliness in inspection reports, see also (Parayre, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Inspection report dated 25 April 1934, 2-4 year-olds section, Paris.

<sup>7</sup> Inspection report dated 13 January 1937, First year, municipality not known.

<sup>8</sup> Inspection report dated 25 January 1938, First year, municipality not known.

with the concerns of 19th century nursery school inspections. In any case, these reports show that children's cleanliness was far from being an issue of secondary importance for 1930s female inspectors. The child-as-pupil figure also appears in many different guises in the 1934-1939 corpus: goals of maintaining school discipline, reference to compulsory activities for children, work linked to reading, writing and mathematics, i.e. the activities on which the emphasis is traditionally placed at school.

What about the situation regarding professional practice for the period 1826-1939? The child-as-pupil figure characterised professional practice within the *salles d'asile* and nursery schools of the Third Republic. The functioning of the *salle d'asile* relied on a brand of discipline (Dajez, 1994; Luc, 1997) similar to school discipline and its goals: developing children's ability to pay attention, and their concentration and application (Vincent, 1980). It focused on certain traditional branches of school learning, such as reading and writing. A study of nursery school furniture shows that the school model continues to have strong resonance after 1881. The widely used configuration of fixed twin desks with benches goes hand in hand with an school approach based on classroom teaching (Luc, 1997, p. 411); it displays a great deal of continuity with the *salle d'asile*, and is far-removed from the prescriptions issued by Inspector-General Pauline Kergomard (Brougère, 1995; Kergomard, 2009), which were not education-related.

As far as the figure of the clean child is concerned, the current status of research reveals a few main themes concerning professional practice during the period 1826-1939. Overall, cleanliness goals feature strongly in the directives throughout this period. A good schoolmistress, who meets the expectations set out in the instructions, attends to the child's personal hygiene care. We can imagine that there is a certain performativity in the official documentation, which necessarily models professional practice to some extent. Many official documents also stipulate that certain personal hygiene-related practices must be implemented as soon as children attend *salles d'asile*. The *salles d'asile* timetable prescribed by the decree of 5 August 1859 requires the matron to spend half an hour a day cleaning children's faces and hands (Luc, 1982, p. 135). Likewise certain facilities such as washbasins encouraged a *de facto* emergence of personal hygiene practices. Some professional journals also bear witness to the fact that great importance was attached at that time to personal hygiene issues in defining the professional role of schoolmistresses. From 1854 onwards, such matters feature increasingly often in *L'ami de l'enfance*, the journal for *asile* staff,

as shown by Jean-Noël Luc (Luc, 1997, p. 220). The professional practices cited include: inspecting a children's cleanliness at the time they arrive (Luc, 1997, p. 201), washing hands and faces, and wiping noses (Luc, 1997, p. 345, 346). Having said that, it should also be borne in mind that professional practice throughout this period was sometimes very far-removed from the directives (Luc, 1997, pp. 341-347). Often, a lack of facilities prevented the prescribed personal hygiene tasks from being carried out properly, for example the absence of washbasins: in 1874, just 10% of the asiles of the Académie of Bordeaux were equipped with these (Luc, 1997, p. 345). Likewise, professional practice, which differed widely from one *asile* to another, was often far-removed from the ambitious directions of some doctors (Cerise, Mauricheau-Beaupré, Piétra-Santa) or philanthropic prescriptions: handing out clothing, performing ablutions all over (not just the hands and face), handing out food supplements such as cod liver oil or iron filings (Luc, 1997, p. 202). Even so, it is apparent that throughout this period, personal hygiene care featured prominently among the professional skills expected of schoolmistresses, and thus gave birth to professional practice in this area. This explains for example why the absence of washbasins did not make it impossible to perform any tasks related to personal hygiene: other types of communal cleaning were sometimes organised, using sponges (Luc, 1997, p. 346).

Thus for the period 1826-1939, the nursery school, and the *salle d'asile* before it, are characterised by two child figures, which show through not only in the official documentation, but also in many practices: the figures of the "clean child" and of the child-as-pupil. During this period (1926-1939), these two figures are also superimposed on one another in some ways: both bear the image of a child, who is working-class<sup>9</sup>, whose education is a political issue, who is controlled (Foucault, 1975), and governed by certain sanitation standards (Boltanski, 1969), so that it grows up into a clean adult citizen who is respectful of the social order. Continuities emerge between the inculcation of personal hygiene discipline and those of instruction and school discipline. Furthermore, with both these two figures, there is a gradual move away from a logic of instilling certain behaviours (school-related and hygiene-related), to a logic of inculcating reasons for these behaviours (Frioux & Nourrisson, 2015; Luc, 1982, p.

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<sup>9</sup> Prior to the second half of the 20th century, only working-class children attend nursery school (Chamboredon & Prévot, 1973; Plaisance, 1986).

27<sup>10</sup>; Vincent, 1980). Schoolmistresses did not remain any less responsible for children's cleanliness.

### **1945-1986: psychology and cleanliness**

From the late 1960s onwards, in nursery school official documentation<sup>11</sup>, new themes, inspired by psychology, gradually assert themselves and completely alter the representations of the child contained in these texts (Luc, 1982, pp. 267-273; Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale – MEN -, 1977). This seems to link up with changes in the representations of health and education. After the end of the Second World War, there was a move away from a clinic-centred approach to health, and the absence of disease, to an approach concentrating on man's relationship with his environment, and on psycho-social expertise (Monnier, Deschamps, Fabry, Manciaux & Rimbault, 1980). Henceforth, a child's health is apprehended to a greater extent via representations inspired more by psychology or by psychoanalysis (influence of studies on the emotional bond or attachment with children by Anna Freud, Spitz, Bowlby and Jenny Aubry<sup>12</sup>) than by Pasteurism. As far as education was concerned, the nature of expert discourses on childhood changed (Dolto, Laurence Pernoud, etc.), becoming more psycho-affective in tone (Neyrand, 2000): while in the past doctors used to be the experts on childhood, it was now psychologists who played this role (Chamboredon & Prévot, 1973). More generally, the period

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Noël Luc comments as follows on the official nursery school texts of the early 20th century, and the novelty of a text from 1905: Where they emphasise the importance of physical exercise or cleanliness of the premises, the early 20th century texts do not innovate (...) What is more original is the desire to teach hygiene to children. In 1882, and again in 1887, this was just another habit that needed to be acquired; in 1905, it is a key quality, that the nursery school regards as a priority: "if the child has not received hygiene training from its family, then it must acquire the taste, the habit and take on board the need for personal hygiene in the school environment." The infant's body is no longer perceived as a passive object: efforts are made to educate it to take part in the task at hand." (Luc, 1982, p. 27).

<sup>11</sup>Very few official documents are in existence on the nursery school between 1945 and 1969, a period when it was deemed to be excellent in its existing condition (Prost, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> It certainly has to be acknowledged that this period was characterised by some changes, cf. the negative then positive attitudes towards collective childcare outside the family sphere between 1960 and 1970 (Neyrand, 2000).

was characterised by the increasing prominence of individualism, which led to changes in representations of the family (De Singly, 1996) and ultimately to a questioning of traditional patriarchal authority (Marcuse, 1968; Mendel, 1968).

In the official documentation, the influence of this “psy” vulgate undermines the figure of the clean child: it as if this figure had increasingly fallen out of fashion. It is also true that, from the post-war period onwards, living conditions improve in terms of cleanliness (for example, many more homes start to have a bathroom). Some official documents show quite markedly how the psychology-inspired apprehension of the child asserts itself over the traditional hygiene-based view (Leroy, 2017; Luc, 1982, pp. 267-273). In days gone, the schoolmistress had to make sure that hands were clean, but henceforth the official documentation order her to observe the child’s behaviours from a psychology-inspired viewpoint (Luc, 1982, pp. 267-273). The influence of this new vulgate also alters the child-as-pupil figure. Guy Vincent has shown that the aims of “awakening” disseminated from the 1960s onwards must be regarded as an evolution in the format of school rather than as the whole concept of school being called into question (Vincent, 1980). The ultimate goal is still to transform the child, and make it leave behind its original, “imperfect” nature, but this is now about seeking to promote its self-expression.

An analysis of inspection reports for 1940 to 1980 reveals an undeniable change in attitudes regarding the “clean child” figure. Three instances of cleanliness-related themes can be observed at the end of the 1950s.

The work on enlarging the school is not yet finished and it’s a pity. The toilets and washrooms truly leave much to be desired<sup>13</sup>.

Hygiene: children well looked after overall<sup>14</sup>.

Buildings. Good – comfortable – clean – sunny. (...) Lovely room, bright and clean. Make sure the children are protected from the sun. The first duty of the nursery school mistress is to take care of the children’s health...<sup>15</sup>.

Thus a decline was setting in: whereas 4 out of every 5 reports in the 1934-1939 corpus mentioned cleanliness, these themes were mentioned in

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<sup>13</sup> Inspection report dated 15 November 1957, older children’s section (5-6 year olds), Herblay.

<sup>14</sup> Inspection report dated 18 March 1958, section unknown, Mantes la Jolie.

<sup>15</sup> Inspection report dated 8 April 1957, intermediate section (4-5 year olds), Saint Gratien.

only 3 reports out of 55 for the 1940-1960 period. After this, they virtually disappeared. Between 1960 and 1980, only one single report out of 50 alluded to these issues. ‘A washbasin in the classroom is of value in developing and reinforcing independence during ‘dirty hands’ activities: clay, making scratch cards, peeling apples, painting etc.<sup>16</sup> A new theme is clearly emerging here, namely that of children’s autonomy vis-à-vis their own hygiene and cleanliness, which is promised a bright future (see below).

In terms of professional practice, around the 1960s and 1970s, the child-as-pupil figure evolves, to target more “expressive” goals, i.e. those linked to the child’s creativity and its emotions, rather than simply to its industriousness (Plaisance, 1986, p. 160; Vincent, 1980). Having said that, the goal of turning the child into an industrious pupil does not entirely disappear from practice either (Dannepond, 1979; Plaisance, 1986).

What about the figure of the clean child in the professional practice of this period? In terms of directives, the period 1960-1980 is characterised by a rise in psychology-based themes, which stand in stark contrast to the traditional personal hygiene-based approach to the child, from the 19th century. This figure virtually disappears from inspection reports. On the other hand, in terms of schoolmistresses’ professional practice at that time, some historical documents show continuity with the preceding period (1826-1939). As part of her doctorate, inspector Calmy-Guyot conducted a survey of female nursery schoolteachers at the beginning of the 1970s, regarding the question of their relationship with children’s bodies (Calmy-Guyot, 1973). We learn, for example, that cleaning up a dirty child was a normal activity for a nursery schoolmistress. Schoolmistresses often attend to the least pleasant tasks, such as cleaning up sick. We also discover a very important fact: schoolmistresses wipe the children’s bottom<sup>17</sup> after defecation. “Without experiencing a sense of disgust... after 17 years of service in nursery schools<sup>18</sup>” declares one of them (Calmy-Guyot, 1973, p. 88). The overall picture that emerges is one of a nursery school where

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<sup>16</sup> Inspection report dated 10 June 1980, intermediate section (4-5 year olds), town or village unknown.

<sup>17</sup> We have chosen to use the verb “*torcher*” [‘wiping bottoms’] rather “cleaning bottoms” in the original French text. This verb, inspired by the author Rabelais, is a more accurate description of the act in question: after defecation, cleaning children’s bottoms involves removing all traces of defecation.

<sup>18</sup> These are not verbatim quotations from school mistresses of the time: their comments have been reformulated by the work’s author.

schoolmistresses attend to many aspects of personal hygiene, and are *responsible* for the cleanliness of children in their class. Reading this work, we can see that some of the old-established personal hygiene practices performed by schoolmistresses, which had gradually established themselves in nursery schools, still endured in the early 1970s. One example was wiping children's noses, a practice mentioned by Calmy-Guyot, and one of the activities that symbolised the nursery school's desire to improve children's personal hygiene (Luc, 1997, p. 346). This information should not cause us to overlook the fact that matrons also had to be strongly mobilised (even more so than schoolmistresses) where personal hygiene issues were concerned. Thus in the official documentation and in inspection reports, it is the psychological relationship with children that prevails; in professional practice, however, the concern with children's hygiene retains a certain degree of importance.

### **1986 to 2013: children become increasingly responsible**

Between 1986 and 2008, the nursery school's formal curriculum underwent a process of 'schoolification'. This process, linked to a more general institutional schoolification of French nursery schools, began in the 1970s and sought to challenge its relative isolation and its specific status within the education system (Garnier, 2016). One of the aims of this policy was to encourage the nursery school to contribute to the battle against school failure. In the official instructions, this schoolification involved a strong affirmation of the figure of the child as pupil, in its partially renewed, sometimes less expressive forms (Leroy, forthcoming – a). During the schoolification period, psychology-based themes declined somewhat, particularly in curricula for 1995 and 2008 (MEN, 1995; 2008a).

What about the figure of the clean child in terms of official documentation over the past thirty years? Firstly, the process of 'schoolifying' the curriculum sometimes worked against this child figure. The 1995 syllabuses state that time devoted to personal hygiene should not encroach on instruction time. The figure of the clean child sometimes tends to disappear from the syllabuses, in favour of more specific regulatory texts on personal hygiene that are less widely read by teachers (MEN, 2008b). However, and this is the second point, some official documents from the period in which the schoolification of the curriculum was taking place tend

to make us assume that there was an evolution in the “clean child” figure rather than merely a decline in this figure. The 2002 nursery school syllabuses mention “proper health education” (MEN and Ministère de la Recherche, 2002, p. 28). In more general texts covering the subject of health at school, these themes culminate in the notion of making the child take responsibility for its own health (MEN, 2003). All of which is reminiscent of the trend unfolding in our societies towards making each us responsible for our own health, as enshrined in the figure of the *homo medicus*, who is responsible for, and is the custodian of, his own health (Peretti-Watel and Moatti, 2009).

In this regard, some continuity is apparent between the official documentation and the inspection reports. A study of the 2000-2010 corpus identified 5 reports (out of a total of 24) mentioning the figure of the clean child. This constitutes some degree of ‘comeback’ for these themes compared with the period between 1960 and 1980 (one out of 50). Some passages refer to the traditional theme of teaching the rules of hygiene and the reasons for them:

after a visit to the toilets, which gives the teacher an opportunity to teach the basic rules of hygiene, the children go to the gymnasium<sup>19</sup>.

I note that Mme. X explains to her pupils, after she has just wiped the nose of one of her charges, that she is going to wash her hands in order to prevent the transmission of microbes. She also teaches her pupils to put their hands in front of their mouths when they cough or yawn. I am grateful to Mme. XXX for having thought about these marks of respect for hygiene and politeness and for having inculcated them in her charges<sup>20</sup>.

Above all, however, the theme of children’s responsibility and autonomy, which we saw emerging in 1980 report, is affirmed even more strongly:

The classroom is on the ground floor. A dormitory and toilets adjoin this room and enable the children to function independently in the afternoons when (the youngest pupils) are having their siesta<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Inspection report dated 3 December 2007, young/intermediate section (3-5 year olds), Paris.

<sup>20</sup> Inspection report dated 16 January 2006, young/intermediate section, Paris.

<sup>21</sup> Inspection report dated 25 January 2005, young/intermediate section, Paris.

...besides various learning situations, [the schoolmistress] inculcates rules of conduct, politeness and personal hygiene that will enable them to get on in life as responsible members of society<sup>22</sup>.

Thus while the principle of devolving responsibility to children is emphasised, it should also be noted that the question of visits to the toilets and of cleanliness more generally is almost always evaded in contemporary reports, which sets them apart from the 1934-1939 corpus. This would seem to be consistent with the 'schoolification' of nursery schools (Garnier, 2016) and the primacy of the educational relationship with children over other possible relationships, notably those linked to care (Leroy, forthcoming – b).

Reflecting the formal curriculum, the child-as-pupil figure enjoys great importance in contemporary professional practice (Leroy, forthcoming – a). What influence does the figure of the clean child have on contemporary practice? Direct observation has shown that it is still apparent in nursery school practice. A school doctor intervenes in each nursery school. Parents must have their child vaccinated before it can attend nursery school, continuing a long tradition that began with salles d'asile (Luc, 1982, p. 76). Schoolmistresses are still pursuing some personal hygiene-related goals, such as combatting fleas. Yet schoolmistresses seem to have distanced themselves from the task of looking after the child's personal hygiene. Nowadays, many classes have "boxes of tissues", of the kind available in the shops, from which users can remove tissues one by one, use them once, then throw them away. Schoolmistresses often ask parents to bring these boxes into school. The emergence of these boxes can be explained by hygiene concerns on the part of the schoolmistress: in this way, she can avoid touching the dirty and contagious tissue. However, it is also possible to place a sociological interpretation on this new practice. This attitude contrasts with the bodily connection of some schoolmistresses in days gone by, who would wipe the noses of children one by one, and of some matrons who wiped children's noses on their own clothes (Luc, 1997, p. 346). The schoolmistress physically involved in wiping the child's nose seems to have given way to the schoolmistress who protects herself from children's nasal mucus. By the same token, the child now finds that it is expected to be self-reliant in carrying out this task, and the box of tissues ideally

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<sup>22</sup> Inspection report dated 16 January 2006, young/intermediate section, Paris.

symbolises the emergence of a child who is capable of using them when necessary, on its own and completely independently. Comparable changes have taken place concerning the wiping of children's bottoms. Schoolmistresses no longer wipe children's bottoms in any of the schools observed. From the first year of nursery school onwards (age 2 to 3), children have to carry out this task themselves, and, in contrast to the 1970s, nobody helps them out – neither a schoolmistress nor a member of ASEM<sup>23</sup> staff, even though this task is very difficult, if not impossible, for children in this age group<sup>24</sup>.

Regarding the question of responsibility, how can we fail to see links between the evolution of the child-as-pupil figure and that of the “clean child” figure? The use of the word “babies”, commonly used to describe first-year children in the 1970s, including in inspection reports, has now disappeared. First-year school reports bear witness to the fact that schools are expecting children in this age group (2-4 year olds) to be educationally more self-reliant.

School report 1. Moussa has settled into class and successfully started First Year lessons. (...) Nevertheless, he is still finding it very difficult to obey class rules and must try to improve his behaviour.

School report 2. Saïdi has settled into class and understands what he is being asked to do. (...) He must try to obey the rules of life more<sup>25</sup>.

The child is expected to turn into a pupil at a very early age, and must also be clean at a very early stage. Moreover, these two responsibilities to be taken on by the child are interlinked. If the child is to be a fully-fledged pupil who is industrious in its school work from the first year onwards, it will need to be clean. Many schoolmistresses do not allow pupils to go to the toilets during “ateliers”, which are emblematic moments of school work (Leroy, forthcoming - a). The child is seen as one of the parties both determining its own success at school and maintaining its own cleanliness,

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<sup>23</sup> ASEM: *Agent Spécialisé des Ecoles Maternelles* (specialised nursery schoolstaff).

<sup>24</sup> Aleksandra Pawlowska (a post-doc in the Cultures et société en Europe research centre at the University of Strasbourg) confided to me that she had observed some ASEM staff in Paris performing this task clandestinely.

<sup>25</sup> Extracts from two school reports from the class of Aurélie, a first-year schoolmistress working in a *Zone d'Education Prioritaire* (education priority area).

no longer encouraged as it once was to take responsibility, but forced to be responsible (Neyrand & Mekboul, 2014). More generally, this child on whom responsibility is placed is not unconnected to the contemporary subject, who is obliged to take charge of its own construction of the self, by trial and error and by taking responsibility for its own individualisation.

The modern trends in the child figures studied here must be correlated with adult figures, which are themselves changing. There are several mutually complementary explanations for the recent trend in adults distancing themselves from taking responsibility for children's general cleanliness. Firstly, the establishment of a graduate route into nursery school teaching following completion of a 3-year degree (MEN, 1989) has tended to refocus attention on educational objectives, in line with the changes in nursery school syllabuses (which has also given rise to changes in initial and continuing training). Of the 15 teachers we observed, the one most concerned with matters of hygiene was the oldest (Marinette, aged 55, Figure, 1).

*Figure 1. Marinette in the toilets*



*Source: Fieldwork (G. Leroy)*

She was the only one to distribute handkerchiefs to her charges and to have collective nose-blowing sessions. She was only one who went into the children's toilets (to distribute toilet paper) and helped them get dressed (although she did not wipe bottoms).

Secondly, the tendency for ever more nursery school teachers to come from middle-class backgrounds, which has been uninterrupted since the 1970s (Berger, 1979; Direction de l'Evaluation et de la Prospective [DEP], 2003), may also have encouraged their move away from focusing on the child's body in favour of a relationship with the child's mind, which is more highly valued by society. Lastly, the way in which modern schoolmistresses distance themselves from the cleanliness of children's bodies must be correlated with the contemporary climate of anxiety and tension regarding children (Kunkel, Smith, Suding & Biely, 2000). The schoolification of the curriculum has gone hand in hand with the emergence of a new relationship with the child that Laurence Gavarini has called a "passion for the child" (Gavarini, 2004). Among the many characteristics of this modern relationship with children is a focus, notably by experts in childhood (psychologists and educationalists) on their profound vulnerability (Furedi, 2001), which is characterised notably by a generalised fear that children will be abused by adults (Déchaux, 2014; Furedi & Bristow, 2010; Javeau, 1998). A great deal of emotion is vested in the modern child: it is very much wanted by its parents (Gauchet, 2007), and it is supposed to unite the modern family and to bring it happiness. The child has become the linchpin and the hub of an infant-centred society (Deschavanne & Tavoillot, 2007), and understandably, the fear that something dreadful will happen to it is now taking on an unprecedented scale. The figure of an innocent and desexualised child (Gavarini, 2006), who is abused by a malevolent adult, haunts the modern social imagination, to the extent that all adults who are in charge of children are the object of suspicion (Sirota, 2012). It is impossible not to establish a link between the distance maintained by modern nursery schoolmistresses and this wider social climate in which the child, who is now regarded as sacred (Déchaux, 2014), now finds itself being apprehended in terms of the notion of risk (Beck, 1986). This modern context of anxiety regarding the child must surely explain why not a single adult still wipes children's bottoms: neither schoolmistresses nor ASEM staff. The latter too, have distanced themselves from children's bodies. Incidentally, during the course of the observations, one ASEM explained that she did not wipe children's bottoms for fear of

being accused of paedophilia.

The fact that the modern schoolmistress sees herself primarily as a teacher, means that she takes little interest in the toilets and in what goes on there. Incidentally, the topic of toilets is largely absent from the discussions held at teachers' meetings, as the teachers observed in several schools confirmed. It is as though these spaces were "out of sight and out of mind", or even non-existent, in contrast to the classroom space, which is carefully thought out, organised and laid out, and re-equipped at regular intervals.

This might explain why the toilets often prove to be very uncomfortable places. The adults do not help the children (the schoolmistress Marinette is an exception), which, for example, results in problems for children in wiping their bottoms, and in discomfort for them, as some children stated during our survey. Next, there is little or no school work associated with using these spaces, a factor that may reinforce their potentially unpleasant nature. If schoolmistresses encouraged to children flush the toilet, there would be fewer lapses here, and therefore less discomfort for toilet users. Like, these spaces could often be better equipped. A single roll of toilet paper, fixed to the wall, is available for all children to use. They can either tear off some spare sheets (which then often end up on the floor) before going to relieve themselves, or they can go to and from for another one after each wiping themselves on each sheet.

The children use both options. There are no coat racks in the playground toilets, so many children lay their coat on the floor, which is often dirty (a mixture of tap water and playground mud on rainy days). Even though these factors are linked to the way these premises are fitted out in the first place, with little attention being paid to the children's comfort overall<sup>26</sup>, schoolmistresses could do certain things to make these moments a more pleasurable experience (e.g. handing out paper, in the way that Marinette does).

Thus one third of the pupils in an older children's class whom we questioned said they avoided going to the toilets. Restraining themselves from going seems to be a strategy many children adopt. From a medical

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<sup>26</sup> Many of these discomfort issues are attributable to the initial construction, e.g. the fact that toilet seats have no rim. However, wooden rims have been compulsory since the instructions of 1887 (Luc, 1997, p. 171). Contact with the seat is particularly cold in the playground toilets. Similarly, the absence of individual cubicles deprives the child of privacy.

point of view, it is known that children who do hold themselves in may develop pathologies<sup>27</sup>. Lastly, the distance maintained by adults from the toilets in the contemporary climate means that these spaces are often not supervised to any great extent, especially during break-times. As a result, this also means that they are spaces conducive to prohibited activities, notably of a sexual nature<sup>28</sup>.

### **Conclusion: attempting to write the anthropology of the contemporary French nursery school**

Thus between 1826 and 1939 there emerged the figure of a child learning the new rules of hygiene that were being disseminated at the time. At the end of the 19th century, the principle of inculcating behaviours seemed to be replaced by one based on explaining the new rules. Between 1945 and 1986, a psychology-based discourse and certain changes in attitudes towards education and health led to a shift away from the concern with children's hygiene, although it did persist in professional practice to some extent (teachers continued to wipe children's bottoms, for example). From 1986 onwards, two figures gradually emerged: that of a child responsible for its own cleanliness (*homo medicus*) and that of a nursery school teacher maintaining her distance from the physical care of her charges, in a context characterised by a renewed focus on educational objectives and anxiety about children's bodies.

Much could be gained from approaching the contemporary situation from an anthropological perspective. In her study of the African societies of Upper Volta, Suzanne Lallemand identified a contrast between the Mossi

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<sup>27</sup> Among girls for example, these may include vulvitis, urine infections or even urinary incontinence (*Observatoire national de la sécurité des établissements scolaires et d'enseignement supérieur*, 2007, p. 34, 37).

<sup>28</sup> In the Grimonprez school, Caroline (a teacher in the intermediate and older children's sections) and Nadja (a teacher in the young children's section) told me about several situations that had arisen in the toilets in previous years. Testimonies from teachers with tenure or other members of the education community (e.g. the school psychologist) confirmed that these stories were true. A male pupil from a second year / final year class had forced a girl in his class to touch his penis on several occasions, threatening to hit her if she did not do so. These events occurred twice (in toilets inside the school). Two years earlier, a boy had performed fellatio on an other boy in the playground toilets.

and the Kotokolis in their relationship with children's faeces (Lallemand, 1981). The Mossi are characterised by close supervision of the excretion process at an early stage in their children's life. The Kotokolis, on the other hand, train their dogs to eat excrement, such that their child can relieve themselves at will. Professional practice in modern nursery schools seems more akin to the strictness of the Mossi. What prevails is a rigorous and determined school plan, seeking to transform the child (into a pupil), and make it leave its original nature behind. Suzanne Lallemand further notes that the Mossi hit a child who relieves itself close to adults or inside the hut. Likewise, among Bamileke farmers, people are not allowed to defecate in sacred areas (Ndonko, 1993). Isn't the classroom space itself something that is sacred today? Lastly, the anthropological line of questioning may also encompass the status of excrement in the nursery school.. In the 'schoolifying' climate of today's nursery schools, it is sometimes as if faeces, traces of faeces, and the places where they are to be found, and the subjective experience attached to them (Baeke, 1999), did not exist (e.g. the children who hold in faeces and urine). In certain societies in Bali, eating is a source of shame (Bateson, 1977). Does the same not apply to excretion processes in nursery schools?

If we are to believe Tanizaki Junichiro, in Japan, a quite different approach to lavatories seems to have existed in days gone by. Special materials (wood for the seat, a paper *shôji*) are selected to enhance the sense of well-being. The shadowy light contrasts with the pale light associated with hygiene.

Japanese-style lavatories are something that is really designed to promote peace of mind. They are always hidden away from the main building, and laid out in the shelter of a grove, so that the fragrance of green foliage and moss reaches you; after following a roofed gallery to reach them, crouching in the shadowy light, bathed in the gentle light of the *shôji* and lost in your daydreams, as you contemplate the spectacle of the garden that extends away beneath the window, you experience an emotion that is impossible to describe. Apparently, the master *Sosêki* rated going to relieve himself each morning as one of life's pleasures (...) (Tanizaki, 1977, p. 21).

In French nursery schools, nothing is done to make these physiological processes a pleasurable experience.

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