

The Pulitzer Reading Resources Center in Guyancourt, France: A Transprofessional Territory

Geopolitical context

In the sixties, French President General De Gaulle decided to create what were called “villes nouvelles” or new towns around Paris to face unprecedented population growth, and to try and control urban development. From his presidential helicopter, he pointed an area of fields, forests and small villages west to Paris, which was to become one of the five suburban New Towns making up the Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines built-up area. Guyancourt was among the small villages included in the perimeter of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines.

In 1974, when Guyancourt was not yet urbanized, the city of Versailles decided to implant there a low-income housing area to house underprivileged families, mainly from foreign origins, that the Royal City was not prepared to welcome.



Guyancourt in the seventies

Conceived as a dead end, turning its back to the village from which it was separated by the cemetery and an artificial lake, the Pont du Rouitoir area was a ghetto of 1,100 low-income apartment blocks housing a fast-growing, underprivileged population.

In the 1980s, a library was founded in the Pont du Rouitoir area. It was a small, pleasant place, within a Social Center located between two buildings where children would come when they did not know where to go. Teenagers came to read the news to see if one of their kind had been arrested or put in jail. Young girls would come along with their siblings, some of them just toddlers. They could come and go all day long, without looking once into a book, just to check who was there. It is to be reminded that most of them belonged to large families living in very small flats and that they were firmly encouraged by their parents not to stay at home during the day. The librarians did their best to focus the children’s interest on collections.

Storytellers were invited and workshops were organized during holidays in partnership with the Social Center, but the “return on investment” was low. The library was just a place to be when school was closed. There were exceptions, of course – young girls would devour any novel librarians would suggest. But as a whole the library did not fulfill its purpose.

The library team, among which there was a former Montessori educator, decided to find new ways to offer access to books to those children, most of them from non-reading families.

The CRL foundation

The CRL (Reading Resources Centre) was founded in September 1990. “A hybrid and polymorphous structure”, as Christophe Evans, a specialist in reading sociology, put it, the CRL was (and still is) located inside the Politzer Primary School, in the Pont du Routoir area but was managed exclusively by librarians. Composed of two large rooms, one dedicated to books and reading and the other to workshops, it was open during and after school hours. The librarians who managed the place welcomed small groups (up to 12) of pupils during school hours to make collective readings or to illustrate or write stories. During playtime and after school, every child could come inside the CRL, take off his or her shoes to enter the carpeted room, and leaf through a comic or a picture book.



Children in the CRL

According to sociologist Christophe Evans, who conducted an inquiry among former users 10 years after the opening of the CRL, the success of the place was due to several factors:

- **Being located in a school**
 - The CRL was felt as a space of freedom in the middle of a restrictive environment. “We could do everything we wanted” says Samia... Which was not true, of course.
 - Even if they could choose not to go to the CRL during playtime sessions, the children were “captive audiences”
- **Being managed by dedicated librarians who conducted mediated actions.**
 - Through workshops, they would lead children to cultural appropriation.
- **Being a cosy place:**
 - “We felt as if we were home”. “We could lie down and read pleasant books”. “We could talk and laugh”. “We were among friends”.

- **Having limited and specific collections in a limited space:**
 - o Collections were carefully chosen to attract children with reading difficulties: there were comics, picture books, tales, interactive books. “No book full of small print”
 - o Too many documents in a large space lead to confusion. A reduced choice is reassuring.

The assessment of the Pulitzer CRL was very positive and its functioning had a slight but real impact on the functioning of the library, as the children would meet the same people in both structures, thus little by little changing their approach to books and reading. But in 2002, the small Pont du Routoir library was shut down as a brand-new library opened half a mile away, in the middle of what has become a modern, well-off, perky area. It was a large, comfortable building, with extensive collections of books, music and films... It was specialized in Poetry but offered numerous documents dealing with gardening, cooking and DIY. It was a place where people from the Pont du Routoir area would not come.



Jean Rousselot Library - 2002



The CRL's new missions and evolution

The opening of the new library was accompanied by a reorganization of the library team and a librarian was specifically hired to manage the Pulitzer CRL according to new rules: she was to work in collaboration with the Pulitzer pedagogical team, during school hours and playtime, and systematically bring children to Jean Rousselot Library for visits and public presentations of the work done during the CRL workshops. But the team wanted to keep “the spirit” of the CRL: a space of freedom and pleasure.



Children reading and playing in the CRL



Collaborative actions

It worked wonderfully thanks to the dynamism and enthusiasm of Odile Carrier, in charge of the CRL. Whilst children would go on coming freely during playtime sessions and after school hours to listen to stories, read comics or play with animated books, she developed strong and fruitful partnerships with Politzer teachers and they jointly conceived workshops related to current educational goals.

Examples

- Writing and/or illustrating tales
- Writing and staging plays (below: the *Princess and the Pea*)



- Exchanging letters and drawings, making a common fairy tale and a recorded version of it with Mopti, within the framework of our exchanges with our Malian “brother Reading Center”.

The children of Guyancourt and those of Mopti created a book together: they invented and illustrated two different tales, one on each side of a large folding book, both tales merging together at the end. Odile Carrier went to Mopti to work with the Malian pupils.



Odile in Mopti

The story was recorded with music, and we now have the book (not the big folding one but another smaller one) with its recorded version with a musical accompaniment in our collections in Rousselot.



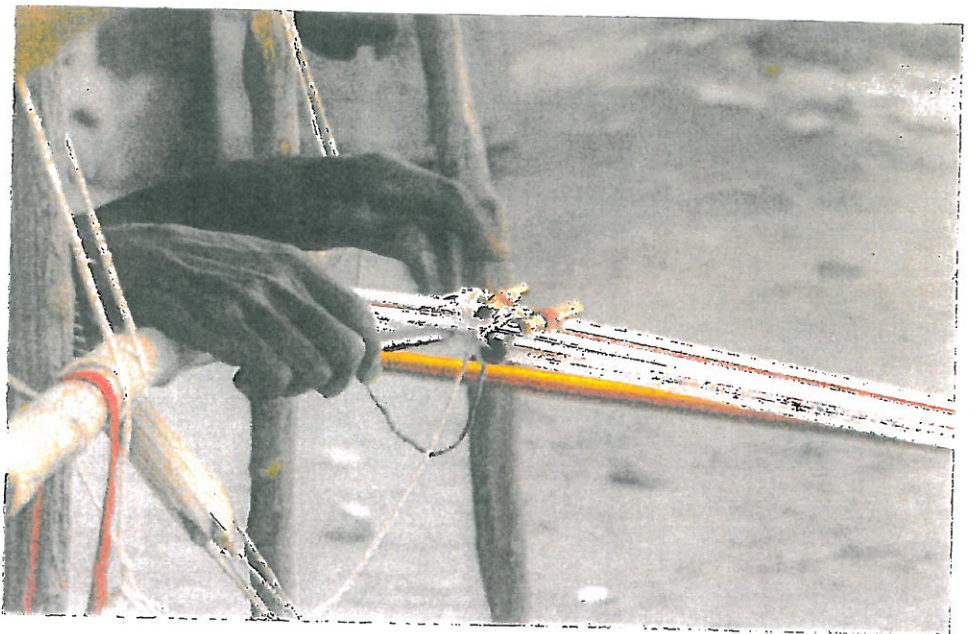
The Franco-Malian folding book

Such workshops with Mopti are very important for the CRL: it gives children from Malian families, who are numerous in the Pont du Routhoir area, an opportunity to (re)discover their culture of origin, and to be proud of it.

Another common workshop dealt with trades and crafts. In Mopti and Guyancourt, pictures of people in the process of working were taken and poems written about them. French children chose a baker, a poet, a librarian and a hairdresser (among other trades) whereas Malian children chose a weaver, a dyer, or an ironworker. The related poems written by French pupils were deliberately funny and dream-like whereas those by Malian pupils were descriptive and precise.



Malian trades



French trades



The workshops are managed by the librarians in charge (Odile Carrier or members of her team) and/or by the teachers. Most of the time, the work is divided into different units to facilitate collaboration and complementarity. As a rule, the recreative parts of a project tend to be carried out by librarians whereas the more didactic aspects are taken care of by teachers, in accordance with their professional requirements.

Politzer teachers got into the habit of using the CRL as a school library. Jean Rousselot has kept its line of purchases as far as CRL collections are concerned: picture books, comics, fairy tales, interactive books. We knew it was not sufficient for a school library but we did not have the money to buy information books. However we were able, when necessary, to lend sets of books on a given subject.

How the CRL became a dual structure:

A year ago, Politzer's headmaster, with the approval of the library, decided to buy a set of documentary books to complete the CRL collections and make a decent school library out of the place. Some 100 documentary books were purchased by the school during summertime while Jean Rousselot bought its usual 100 annual books – comics, picture books, playbooks.

A full-size workshop

Books do not make up a library. Both teachers and librarians had the idea to organize a full-size workshop involving all the 220 Politzer pupils, to set up the new dual structure.

To achieve this aim, 80 workshops were organized, involving an average of 12 pupils each.

The younger pupils took part in the indexation of picture books:

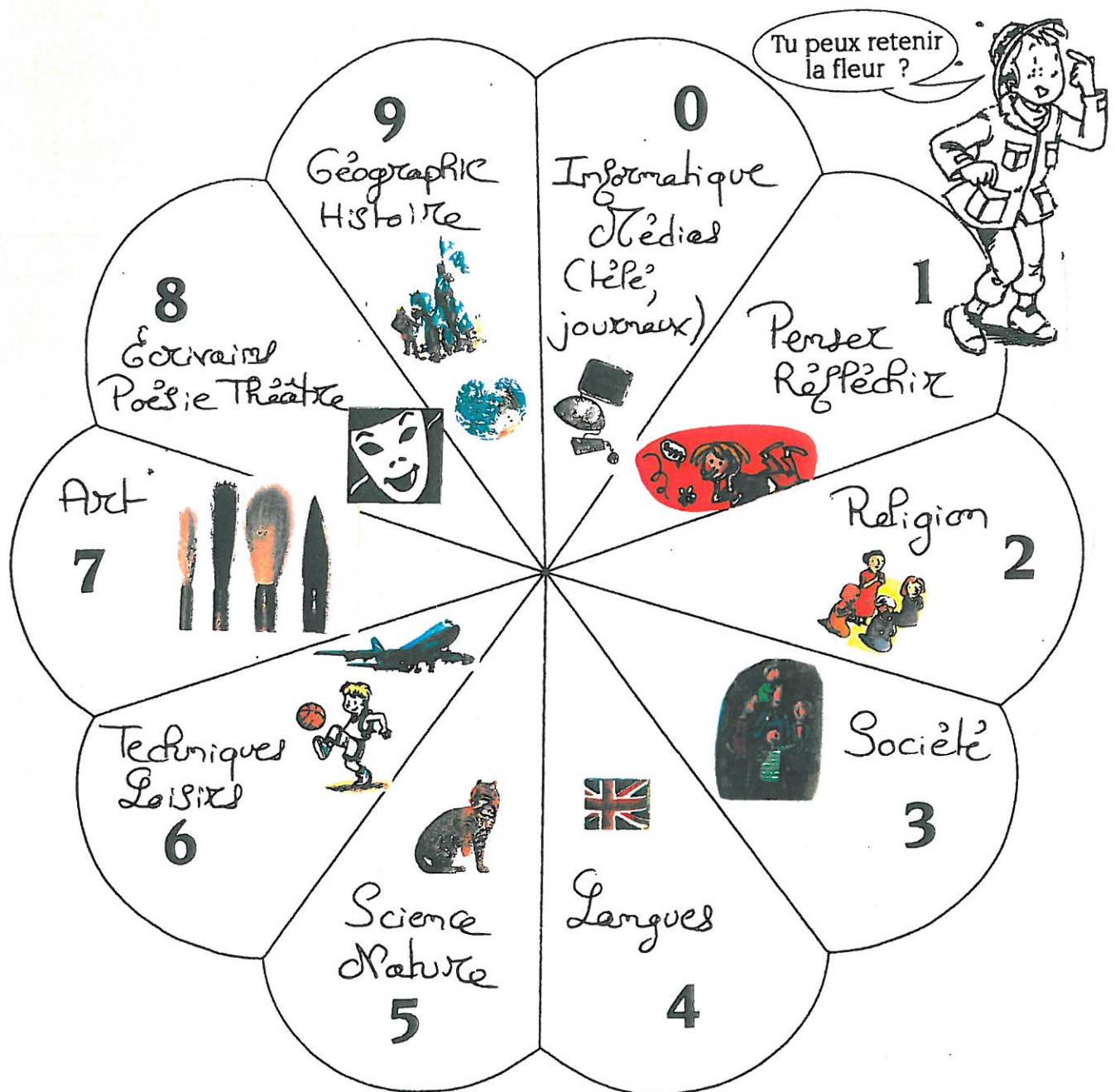
They had to

- Find the first letter of the author's name;
- Print the right letter and stick it on the right-hand bottom of the cover;
- Put the book at the right place on the book shelves.

There were organized games to allow them to make the difference between information books and picture books. Facing a stack of books, they had to separate them into information books and picture books and explain their choices.

Pupils between 7 and 11 worked on the indexing of documentary books, learning the Dewey system through what we call a daisy (see below).

They even have discussed in which Dewey class to put a specific book. For example, a book entitled "what is life" aroused discussion. Some of the students wanted to put it into the 500 class, others in the 100 class, for it dealt both with sciences and philosophy.



And then they were three

Last fall, the local leisure centre welcoming children from 2 to 11 years of age after school, on Wednesdays and during school holidays, joined in the project with the agreement of both the library and the school teams. The leisure centre bought books for very young children “baby books” and new shelves.

The leisure centre enjoys by itself the CRL facilities on Wednesdays and during holidays. Librarians organise thematic workshops in relation with the annual program worked out by activity leaders. On week days, children from the leisure centre share the place with pupils who stay in after school hours, waiting for their parents to come and collect them. They read and play together. Those who can read often take the opportunity to read stories to the youngest. When parents come to fetch them, they are invited to join in the reading activities and borrow books to read at home.

At the beginning of the school year, in October, librarians, teachers and activity leaders invited the families to come and visit the place and to take part in book-covering sessions (with cakes and tea) on Saturdays. It worked well and every participant thought it was great fun.

The CRL has become a reference place for all the children of the Pont du Rouvoir area. They are bound to frequent it, as pupils or during holidays. And their parents are invited to come in the afternoons, or after school, to share stories with them.

It is not a library (the library is only 500 meters away). It is a place where children discover the pleasure of reading, and learning too, and where people who do not read – or would not dare to go to the library – are offered an opportunity to get acquainted with librarians, books, stories, and to take part in cultural events. The parents we meet there will come more easily to the library to benefit from its services and propositions.