

***I wish someone would listen to me!* An exploratory research about
unschooling single-mothers families in France**

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Abstract

The first part of this exploratory research describes, through the eyes of mothers, the lives of unschooling families in France, before and after the separation of the parental couple. How do they cope with the effects of separation, once they become single-parent families, particularly in relation to education? What place is given to their voice and that of their children? Are they heard and listened to?

Keywords: single-parent mothers, unschooling, neurodiversity, domestic violence

Préambule

The initial aim of this article was to uncover whether or not the unschooling lifestyle could continue in the lives of single-parent families in France after the parents' separation. Could this way of life survive the separation of the parental couple or not? Under what conditions? Had the children been heard? Interviews were to be conducted with families: mothers, fathers and children.

I proceeded with interviewing ten mothers. To my surprise, it turned out that nine of them had been victims of domestic violence. Consequently, to preserve their safety and that of their children, it was totally unthinkable to question their ex-spouses. This text, which would not have existed without their testimony, is a humble tribute to their courage.

Introduction

The development of homeschooling has been observed worldwide for many years (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013, 2020). Depending on national legislation, it is supported, tolerated, or increasingly restricted, for a variety of reasons. The latter is the case in France. Based on a review of the literature on this phenomenon, the aim of this multi-faceted exploratory research is to examine the effects of the separation of unschooling parents and assess its consequences on the family's life, particularly on the children. Is unschooling preserved despite the separation of the parental couple? Are the children listened to? Is their voice taken into account in the process?

I'll explain firstly, what it is to be unschooled in France, and secondly, what the separation of the parental couple means for these families. For the reasons given in the preamble, the first section, based on the mothers' own words, gives a maternal perspective on the effects of the separation in the family. In the following two sections, I will hear from fathers and then from children. Lastly, in the fourth section, the words of professionals,

working with these families through institutions, will be compared with the results collected in the previous stages of this research.

My aim, through this exploratory research, is to open up a new field of investigation into unschooling, by describing a marginal part of its population, both in terms of numbers and visibility. My stance is that giving an account of the experiences and words of these people, children and adults alike, could make it possible to question the scope of decisions, both legislative and judicial, with a heightened awareness of their consequences.

Methodology

Research and Publications in France

Research on IEF—Instruction En Famille—(education in the family) is fairly recent in France. Since the 1990s, it has mainly been represented by a few university dissertations by students in social work, education sciences, anthropology, sociology, political studies, psychology and journalism.

In 2015/2016 the PROSCIEF seminar—Processus de scolarisation à l'épreuve de l'Instruction En Famille— (schooling processes to the test of family instruction) was born, at the initiative of Philippe Bongrand, from the EMA laboratory—Ecole, Mutations, Apprentissages- (School, Mutations, Learning) at the University of Cergy-Pontoise. In the study *Instruction(s) en famille. Explorations sociologiques d'un phénomène émergent*, (Educations in Family. Sociological Exploration of an Emergent Trend) which he coordinated with Dominique Glasman (2018), the low number of publications on this subject is pointed out: "... occasional studies exist on the French case (...) but they are still too few or too recent to constitute this theme as an identified chapter in educational research manuals..." Among the work carried out by this team, unschooling was the main focus of Jean-François Nordmann's attention, while MéliSSa Plavis's work—two Master 1 theses, one in philosophy, the other in anthropology, followed by a Master 2 thesis in anthropology—served as the basis

for her book *Apprendre par soi-même avec les autres et dans le monde. (Learning by oneself with the Others and into the World)*. There is no research by this team, or student work, about single-parent unschooler families in France at this time, so my exploratory research constitutes the first study on this subject.

Meanwhile, we see in the global academic community that homeschooling and unschooling, have given rise to a considerable mass of publications, particularly in North America. In the United States, some of these publications have come from organizations engaged in activism or institutional research. For their study *Homeschooling: A comprehensive Survey of the Research 2013*, R. Kunzmmann and M. Gaither looked at over 1,400 such publications, including journal articles, theses, book chapters, books and reports. When they updated their study in 2020, they consulted even more documents:

As with the 2013 version, we collected and analyzed virtually the entire universe of English-language homeschool research and scholarship. New candidates for our review included 246 journal articles, 170 theses, 73 book chapters, 14 books, and 16 reports, which added 519 academic texts beyond the scope of our 2013 article and brought the full total of texts analyzed to more than 2,000. (p.6)

Nevertheless, single-parent unschooler families don't seem to be a theme already covered.

Data collection

Two types of data were used to conduct this exploratory research: interviews and written documents.

Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were all conducted remotely, by video-conference, with ten mothers, one father and four children. The parents were asked to give their definition of unschooling and to describe their life before and after the separation from their partner.

The interviews with the mothers were at times emotionally difficult, with two mothers unable to hold back tears as they described their living conditions. Fear and stress were palpable during these interviews, to the point where one of them refused to give me her first name, out of fear of reprisals if she were identified by the father.

Only one father was interviewed. This interview was carried out at the beginning of the research. Later, the decision was made on my part not to interview the other fathers. In addition, two fathers had already declined to be interviewed.

Two children, a teenager and a younger one, spontaneously joined in the conversation I was having with their mother. With two other siblings from the same family, I discussed various aspects of their lives before and now, as well as their wishes.

The call for testimonials was launched via a national online homeschooling community supported by nonprofit organization LED'A, Les Enfants D'Abord, (the children first); as well as through an online Parisian homeschooling community. Individuals then relayed the call to their personal networks on their own initiative. The people interviewed were not necessarily members of LED'A, nor did they live specifically in the Paris region.

The fact that nine of these ten women had been victims of domestic violence completely changed the basic theoretical framework, as indicated in the preamble. The initial plan to compare the discourses of different members of several families, shedding light on a situation from multiple points of view, was evidently a logical one. But the risks of possible reprisals against these women and children, imposed a different path for the research. Were the ex-spouses fond of academic reading? The fear expressed by these women was so clearly perceptible that it could only be respected anyhow. It is with this logic of respect and protection in mind that some of the writing choices were made. Children are referred to only by a generic term, and never by daughter or son. Domestic violence is not described. Mainly, because domestic violence itself is beyond the scope of this research, but also because some

mothers' specific expressions or depictions of facts could allow an identification. For the same reasons, the numerous judicial stages relating to custody rights, visiting rights, various requests and follow-up to complaints, as well as social and educational investigations, are not detailed.

There was an obvious difficulty in finding people willing to testify. Having thought about my inquiry for several years, and having already carried out interviews around it, I knew that unless a serene way of life could be maintained by the separated families, the situation could instead become very conflictual and escalate, creating fear and an overall feeling of overwhelm. As it turns out, the situation sometimes is so violent for the mothers, who generally are in charge of the children's learning on a daily basis, that even years later, some of them no longer want to talk about such difficult times. Taking this into consideration makes the testimonials gathered in this research all the more valuable.

At this stage, two questions arise. Could it be that unschooling is an environment in which the expression of domestic violence is more prevalent than elsewhere, if nine out of the ten interviewed mothers are victims of such violence? Let's keep in mind the official data on domestic violence in France “208,000 victims of violence committed by their partner or ex-partner in 2021 (.1.) the majority of victims are women”¹ and the fact that only 0.36% of children are educated at home out of 13 million pupils in France, according to the data most frequently cited by both the French Ministry of Education and researchers. Furthermore, an attempt to link children's mode of instruction with the rate of domestic violence suffered by mothers, would require extending the study to all modes of instruction: in public schools, in private schools as well as in homeschooling and unschooling settings.

¹<https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/287560-violences-conjugales-une-forte-hausse-en-2021>

An additional concern for my study was to achieve diversity in the sample of mothers. The diversity of their geographical location, their age, their professional profile—even if few of them were working at the time of the survey- and their personal histories, seems sufficient for an exploratory research focused, nonetheless, on one common characteristic: being a single-parent family. The national distribution of my call to testify is reflected in the diversity of their geographical locations and the absence of links between them. Only one of these mothers contacted me on her own, through one of her friends who had already responded to my request for an interview.

The occurrence of domestic violence, mentioned in the sample with such frequency, raises additional questions about the context of separation. Does the separation of a couple necessarily leads to domestic violence? Or in what proportion? Or does domestic violence precede the separation of a couple?

A factor that may have led these mothers, victims of spousal abuse, to come forward was the point made by all of them: that they were not really listened to, until then. It seemed that they were at a certain point in their lives, which gave them the strength to talk about what they were going through as well. Indeed, several mothers mentioned they wouldn't have been able to talk like this a few years ago. The title of this article *I wish someone would listen to me!* reflects this reality.

Written Documents

The written documents provided by the mothers were reports on the supervision of their children's education, drawn up by school inspectors; letters from members of the paternal family, discrediting the mother and the children's education, and addressed to various educational and legal institutions; and court judgments. Whenever that was necessary, further details were obtained by e-mail.

Participant Characteristics

All participants had to be unschooling parents, separated from their spouse, living in a single-parent family.

The Mothers

The mothers are referred to only as mothers. In this moment of their lives, when they have chosen to share their struggle with me, they speak mainly as mothers judged by society. However, their lives are not limited to their maternal role. They are women, professionals, artists, creative people, etc. They range in age from 36 to 50. All of them graduated from high school. Out of ten, completed between 3 and 5 years of college education. They live in different parts of mainland France. Some live in urban areas, others in rural areas. Half of them is neuroatypical. They have been separated from their last spouse for between 3 and 14 years. Three of them had one or more children from a previous union, which also led to separation. Altogether, they have 23 children.

The Fathers

For reasons already explained, they are only described through the mothers' discourse.

The Children

There are 23 of them, aged from 5.5 to 21. Six of them were shortly schooled before being unschooled, while the others have always been unschooled. Only one of them is neurotypical. Some live with their mother, others with their father. All of them, except for one, whose father is deceased, see the parent they don't live with, sometimes of their own free will, sometimes forced by a court decision.

The three children, half siblings, born from their mothers' previous unions play the unexpected role of a control group, allowing us to compare the conditions of their mother's separation from their father with that of their most recent partners. Did these children have a similar experience throughout their parents' separation? Did they continue to receive their education outside school or not?

Before Separation: Living and Learning in Unschooling.

As we know, unschooling was theorized by Jonh Holt (1923-1985), first a teacher, then a researcher and author of numerous books on education, including *How Children Learn*, translated into French as *Comment l'enfant apprend, Le besoin vital de comprendre* in 2019 and *How Children Fail (L'école ou la fabrique de l'échec, 2019)*. He was also the founder of the first periodical dedicated exclusively to homeschooling, *Growing Without Schooling*, published from 1977 to 2001.

In another of his books, *Learning all the Time*, translated into French as *Les apprentissages autonomes, Comment les enfants s'instruisent sans enseignement*, 2014, he writes that it's impossible to be conscious and alive without being constantly learning something.

Defining Unschooling

In the field of research, unschooling belongs to the educational sciences. It refers to an out-of-school mode of instruction, currently familiar in France under the generic name of IEF -*Instruction En Famille*. This term, which follows that of "*non sco, non scolarisé (out-of-school)*", more in force until the early 2000s, is regularly discussed in family groups, as it is deemed unsatisfactory and gives the impression of limiting instruction to the family environment alone, without reflecting its richness of openness to the outside world. In the French IEF landscape, different educational modalities stand out: home schooling, i.e. the transposition of the schooling model, the use of correspondence courses or the unschooling option, i.e. free, self-managed, formal or informal learning, but always guided by the child's intrinsic motivation (Riley, 2016), demands and interests. The various unschooling trends: Relaxed Unschooling, Radical Unschooling (Riley, 2020) are little used in France, with the exception of Worldschooling. A thesis on this subject is currently being prepared in France.

Supporting the child's natural ability to learn is not an innate capacity for all parents. Imposing the content of learning through authority has become what is natural. For some parents, changing this requires a genuine process of intellectual deschooling. A process generally described as: letting go of the school's hold on their way of thinking and ultimately trusting themselves and their children. Trust is even more necessary in unschooling (which lacks all the safeguards—grades, curricula, assessments, textbooks, exercises, etc. — recommended by the institutional French “Education Nationale”), than it is typically in homeschooling. One of the international groups working on Education to transform schools worldwide at this time is named Unschooling school.²

The Right to be an Unschooler

In France, school is not compulsory. But education is. On March 28, 1882, a law instituted compulsory education for children of both sexes between the ages of six and thirteen. This law underwent several stages and transformations, in 1763, 1773, 1792, 1793, 1833 and 1881. Since then, instruction can be given in public or private schools, or in families. Over the years, this has become increasingly restrictive in regard to homeschooling families. In 1998, concerns around cults led to stricter regulations; in 2006, a law aiming at preventing delinquency tightened the control of homeschooling families even more; the pressure escalated, with homeschoolers being likened to terrorists in 2015 and to radicalized people, in 2016. The latest law, in 2019, likens them to separatists. And that's not counting other aborted bills in 2007, 2011, 2013 and 2014. Although the investigations carried out by the various governments have failed to substantiate these accusations, these laws have been

² <https://www.unschoolingschool.com/agrave-propos-de-nous.html>

upheld. In addition, an amendment to the Education Code now stipulates that instruction must take place in schools as a matter of priority.

Despite all these restrictions, homeschooling still operated on a declaratory basis. At the start of the school year, a simple letter from the parents or the child's legal representative had to be sent to the school district and the town hall corresponding to the family's place of residence. This declaration gave rise to an annual inspection of instruction and a survey by the town hall every two years. But a new obligation has emerged: since September 2019, education has been compulsory for children from the age of three, rather than six. And since September 2022, families have had to request authorization to educate their child(ren) outside school. There are four grounds for this: the child's state of health or disability, the intensive practice of sports or arts, the family's itinerancy in France or geographical remoteness from any public-school establishment, and the existence of a situation “specific to the child” motivating the educational project.

Initial observations show systematic refusals in some districts and a wide disparity in responses between districts, whatever the request. This measure, like previous ones, has only fanned the flames of the families' anger, leading to their exile to other countries, the multiplication of lawsuits and, recently, the emergence of a civil disobedience movement. It also enabled researchers from all over the world to publicly express their support for the families in France through an open letter to President Macron, published in *Other Education* Vol. 9 No. 2 (2020): *Speaking Well: For President Macron of France: An Open Letter*. These legislative difficulties are compounded by others of a pedagogical nature. Indeed, the academic staff responsible for supervising instruction—inspectors, educational advisors and even teachers—are generally not trained in other types of pedagogy, such as Montessori, Waldorf-Steiner, Freinet and others. So, for some, unschooling is totally out of their conceptual reach.

These elements of contextualization of the French homeschooling situation help us to understand the strength and determination required to embark on such an educational path, and that, consequently, this is not a family choice to be made lightly.

From Couple to Separation

Choosing Unschooling as a Family

All these mothers claim to have led the way in choosing this type of education. They became aware of its existence in various ways, through discussions, conferences, Clara Bellar's documentary film *Etre et devenir (Being and becoming, 2014)* or through proximal parenting networks. One of the mothers had attended a Waldorf-Steiner school as a child and was already open to alternative schooling. For some of the mothers, their children's atypical profiles, suffering and difficulties at school, prompted them to reconsider schooling. They found out about it, then spoke to their partner, who, depending on the case, was enthusiastic or worried, thought about it, then accepted the idea, and either got involved or not at all. In practice, and as already mentioned in various works (Lois, 2017; Probeuf, 2021) mothers took charge of instruction.

For these mothers, unschooling means: "*Supporting the child's free learning; being available; providing a sufficiently rich environment to arouse interest in various areas; encouraging the child in his or her interests; following the child's rhythm; not following the official National Education programs; managing feelings; learning can be formal or informal; mentoring children rather than directing them; responding to the child's needs; not leaving him or her out in the wild with nothing; education outside of school structures in which we can implement the subjects we want depending on the periods of our lives: trips, encounters with different intercultural and social groups, games; meeting children's curiosity, questions and desires; tangible things in real life; meeting other people in general, not just homeschoolers; non-rigid education that leaves room for the pleasure of learning and*

empowerment; the child is happy to be able to manage what pleases him and to be able to manage what interests him; leaving the child free to learn; the mother is a companion and an observer, not a teacher; accompanying the children in life by following their impetus; simply living, living together; finally, learning was done in everyday life, following the children's interests."

From such postulates, it becomes clear that unschooling cannot be dissociated from daily life, both as a permanent source of learning and as a way of life and respect for others. As Melissa Plavis writes, it's "*a way of being in the world*" (Plavis, 2017).

Telling their Unschooling Story

Their eyes sparkle and their voices take on a nostalgic intonation, when, during interviews, they recount their unschooling lives with their children. "*It was a real joy to homeschool my children, and it's a real heartbreak, four years later, to have been forced to stop... Around the age of three or four, one of my children wanted to know where pee came from. So we learned a lot about the urinary system.*"

In another family, the children's passion for pirates has led them to acquire knowledge in geography, history and technology. Others, enthralled by the fire department, have visited fire stations, they have studied the siren, the knots and attended training sessions. Whenever a theme is of interest to them, they study it in depth, for a certain period of time. Living in the countryside, they spent many hours in nature, regenerating. The mothers recounts weekly activities with other families, like picnics where community is experienced: "*We look at what other people eat, talk about allergies and intolerances, and share recipes. This leads to discussions about diets.*"

The children haven't swallowed knowledge, they've learned to put it to good use. And since their forced schooling, they've amazed teachers with their academic knowledge and maturity. "*One day, the teacher asked me: 'How did you manage to make him so comfortable*

in maths? I explained that I'd never asked him to learn the multiplication tables by heart, but that he used them and soaked them up." Similarly, an 8-year-old is able to analyze his needs lucidly: *"Mom, I refuse to go to school, because for the time being, I still need to be able to settle down and be by your side."* Unschooling also means resting, eating and going to the bathroom according to the needs expressed by your body, not according to the school timetable.

Mothers report accusations made by their ex-partners against this lifestyle, describing them as lax. Unschooling becomes *"a way of attacking us, of making us look like people who have no rules in life, whereas my children have a reputation for being polite and knowing how to fit in."*

One day, either because of too much violence, or for other reasons, the marriage ends. Some separations happen with respect for the children and for the other parent. In other cases, a parent and the child(ren) may have to flee to ensure their safety.

What happens to life in unschooling in these conditions? How do children express themselves in such a family crisis, and are they heard and listened to?

The Effects of Separation

Has the family's daily life been altered by the separation of the couple? Have the parents managed to preserve their relationship? How were the children educated? How were family roles distributed during the different periods: before and after the separation? What is the quality of life like for children, mothers and fathers? How do children learn, where, when and with whom? Is education becoming a means of domination for one parent or the other? Is (re)schooling giving some sort of leverage to one of the parents? What about the children? Are their educational and lifestyle choices, including visitation and custody rights, listened to, taken into account and respected?

Co-parenting During the Separation

What does co-parenting look like in the turmoil of separation, and why? In all the cases observed, co-parenting can work or can be challenging. This depends on whether or not preserving the children's well-being was a core value for the parental couple. *"The father thought it <unschooling> was great. He was making a good living, bringing us the money that made it possible, and I was taking care of family life. We complemented each other. He wasn't around much, but when he was his presence was felt: serene, enthusiastic. The four of us often traveled together. But then came the end of the loving couple. We were no longer a married couple, but the parental team still worked well. It was respectful. We continued to live under the same roof, the house was big. We were good together. We're still buddies. I have great confidence in him. We both know we can count on each other. The separation didn't call homeschooling into question. Then he moved out, then I did too, and the house was sold. He was very busy with his work, so the children stayed with me, but they saw him. We've always got on well together. The children's needs come first."*

In other cases, trust becomes an issue. *"Now I refuse to talk to him; everything has to be in writing, to have proof. I wanted us to remain friends, to celebrate the children's birthdays together, to remain a family."*

Mode of Education

The first trend to emerge from this exploratory research is that the day-to-day lives of mothers and children hang by a thread: the father's attitude towards education. It would seem that a sincere dialogue enables conversations around the child's education and allows the parents to find solutions that meets both the child(ren)'s and the parents' needs. Further investigation is needed to fully confirm this. Consequently, two groups of families are identified: the group in which the fathers wish to continue unschooling, and the group in which the fathers want to end it. The first group is divided into two subgroups, highlighting the reasons for their choice. In the first sub-group, the fathers actively embrace the life

project, when in the second, they more passively rely on to the mother to take on the child(ren)'s educational needs. In the second sub-group, fathers refuse to maintain unschooling, request the child's schooling and obtain it by legal means.

When the father agrees to continue unschooling, because he still supports the project, he doesn't question it. *"The project dates back to before we separated, and we both agreed to it. I found out about unschooling, talked to the father about it, he thought about it and then said he agreed. The child went to a democratic school, we were full-time employees, but he didn't take the separation well. Six months before the confinement, I negotiated to be working remotely. Then the lockdown came, and it was a test. It went well, so we kept going. It was the last step before unschooling. The father lets me do it because he's not in charge of the unschooling. But he makes his new partner's children do their homework. He works shifted hours, so unschooling is practical. He expresses fears, but doesn't put up any barriers. He's still in the process of de-schooling, because he's more formatted, he's scared without any program. He says: What if he falls behind on the program? Will that do him any good later on in high school? I'm not sure how to go about it, but I'm not going to stand in your way. The point of agreement remains, because if he's trying to harm me, he's making his son unhappy, so unschooling is okay."*

"Unschooling was a decision we both made. He stayed on the same line, he didn't budge. He did everything he could to keep it going, not to upset them. He helped and contributed so that the children could continue as they wished. We always asked the children their opinion, whether they wanted to continue or go to school. The four of us always did it together. And that continues after the separation."

One mother succeeded in creating "an atypical and functional team", together with the child's father and her new partner, who lives in a different home. This happened after the separation and a bad school experience for the child. *"The teacher was nice, but learning to*

read with the mask was complicated! Second class was a very problematic year. By the fall break, he still couldn't read. During the short vacations, I started all over again with him. At the start of the new school year, he was a beginner reader. But on January 8, he went into convulsions before leaving for school. After a lot of crying, I decided to stop. School shouldn't make anyone sick. Neither adults nor children. Homeschooling is the last bastion of protection we have to defend our children, even if it means breaking the law."

Some fathers don't prevent the continuation of unschooling, but accept it without getting involved. *"It wasn't by mutual agreement because I ran away with the children and the suitcases due to domestic violence when the children were one and two years old."* But after the children had serious difficulties at school, when she spoke to the father about unschooling, he replied: *"I trust you to make the best decisions for them. You know the kids. Do what you want, but I won't give you a penny more than the child support. We got into this without knowing precisely where we were heading to. He doesn't oppose or pressure. He says: it's not my problem. He wasn't close to the children, only I could see that there were problems at school. One of the children was suspected of being on the autistic spectrum; he had obsessive-compulsive disorders, and his father was ashamed of him. When I told him the child was having problems at school, he'd say: "It's okay, we don't care about school. At that point, I needed to be abusive to a certain point with my child to get him to school."*

Some fathers, feeling a separation coming on, suddenly no longer accept unschooling and question the proximal parenting they experienced years ago. This can also happen when mothers initiate the divorce or separation process. The fathers' sudden disagreement, however, seems contradictory with years of joined declarations sent to the school district intendants and to the town hall officials in regards to their chil(ren)' homeschooling. In some families, the mother took care of the administrative formalities on her own, but none of these mothers' ex-spouses personally contacted the town hall or school district to express their

disagreement with their child's mode of education. Does this mean that they all consented? As the saying goes, *He who says nothing, agrees*. But if so, what is the value of their sudden disagreement: a healthy concern for their child's well-being, or a personal vendetta against the mother?

As a result, within just a few weeks, mothers' and children's lives sometimes undergo an intense upheaval. The child loses his environment, his friends, his rhythm, he no longer has time to devote to his passions, he is forced, against his will and with no regard for his lack of consent, to go to school every day. *"From one day to the next, our whole life was shattered. A lot of people didn't understand that children were traumatized."*

What's more, the child has been betrayed by his own parent. Two mothers testify that the father told the child that this schooling decision came from the judge, and one explains: *"The child is very angry and no longer trusts his father, because he lied to him, and I've decided to stop acting as a buffer between them."*

How does a child who can no longer trust his parent build up his personality? At the age of 8, he hatched a deadly plan against his father. *"I've found the solution, I'm going to kill dad. ("You can't do that"). Yes, I can if I push him off the top of the stairs, he'll fall face-first onto the slab below, and at least we'll have some peace and quiet, so we can go back to homeschooling."* What suffering does this child go through to come up with such a solution?

How do these children cope with forced schooling? Some get used to it, are welcomed in a school where the staff is attentive to their needs and enjoy themselves. For others, it's a daily hell, and as the years go by, the load adds up, it becomes unbearable. *"For almost four years, the child has never accepted schooling. The child screams every morning, clings to the school gates. The headmistress says I'm mistreating him."* Another child is bored all day. He finishes his work quickly and waits. For a few months now, he's been allowed to read, so he waits while he reads. He has a few friends, whom he stubbornly refuses to see outside school

and says he wastes his time there, misses his homeschooler buddies, wants to stop and resume unschooling. *"The children feel very badly at school, even if they have excellent results. Over the past two years, they've just learned to do decimal division, but they've lost their taste for history and geography, and have no general knowledge. Since they started school, children no longer know each other. They fight more often. The gap between them is widening. There used to be a great bond between them. At school, they can't see each other, just behind a fence."* This observation echoes that of another mother, whose child, now a young adult, went to school temporarily when he was a child: *"His schooling blocked everything, and after that, I never succeeded in getting him back to the curiosity he had before, or the desire to learn. I tried everything, though."*

Violence, Again and Again

The repercussions of domestic violence are disastrous, both for the mothers who endure it and for the children who also suffer (Juillard, 2021). But leaving the marital home doesn't mean moving on to a less grueling life—quite the contrary, as the infernal cycle continues, extended, legally, by institutional violence. As a result, the mental burden on mothers is enormous. *"The worst thing is not to put up with everything, but to be accused of everything by the father. I've lost all my courage. I'm just waiting for the divorce to be over. I'm resigned to it. I haven't had any daily joy for three years. I don't have a day that goes by that's happy. I'm just fulfilling my role as a mother so that my children are as happy as possible. That's all."*

These children, newly enrolled in school, found themselves at the heart of ordinary educational violence. During interviews, mothers recounted examples of unacceptable mistreatment by schoolteachers and headmasters or headmistresses. Becoming parent representatives on school boards and committees, these mothers tried in vain to alert parents and make other parents aware of the seriousness of the abuses. No reaction, no report to the

local school district. These abuses were perpetuated, sometimes solely against their children, giving rise to public apostrophes such as *"Just go back to your homeschooling. You're not doing anything here anyway!"* or against all the children in the school. In one case, all the children, from first to fifth grades, took the situation into their own hands, organized a meeting in the school playground, listed their grievances and wrote a letter. As the letter was very vindictive, the children's spokesperson's mother (an unschooler mother) explained to her child the importance of rightly formulating a request. Therefore, the letter was redrafted, in a more moderate tone, and then taken to the headmistress. The child spokesman had spontaneously volunteered, and was well aware of the consequences of such a mission: *"I can manage that the spokesman will undoubtedly take a lot of heat."* Since then, the teacher has taken a long sick leave and will be replaced at the start of the 2023 school year. For mothers whose upbringing is based on kindness, the conflict of values is very hard to bear. As for bullying, some mothers explain that it's often described as a *conflict between children*, a now common expression in the French *éducation nationale*'s novlanguage, exempting educators and staff from any need to intervene.

The Division of Parental Roles

When a child is sent to school against his or her will, how are parental roles divided between the two parents?

The roles hardly change: the father continues to focus on his professional activity, which generates income for him; the mother continues to use her time to tend mostly to the children, and, depending on their profile, to ensure the appointments their condition requires: psychological follow-up, speech therapy, psychomotricity, diagnoses and recognition of neurodiversity, to which are added complaints to the police station, when paternal violence continues to affect the children, court hearings, all interspersed with social investigations, educational measures and psychological assessments...

Schooling is a terrible ordeal for many of these children. The lunch break is the only chance to breathe during the day, so as far as possible, they don't have lunch in the canteen, but go home. In these conditions, between journeys and meals, how can mothers hold down a job that would enable them to get out of the financial abyss into which they have plunged? In unschooling, some of them worked on a part-time basis job, but this has become totally impossible given their new living conditions. One of them has an early retirement pension, and says, *"Even if it's still difficult to bring up a child on my own, I'm still very lucky to be able to bring in an income to support our needs."* Another, who set up her own business, and was able to maintain unschooling, lucidly observes *"The fact of being isolated and in homeschooling makes (my professional situation) more challenging and erases the impact of diplomas and specific skills."* The impoverishment of homeschooling mothers (Machovcova, Beláňová, Kostelecka, & McCabe, 2021) is accentuated since the separation from the fathers for all these mothers. On top of all, some fathers' pressure don't help. *"When one of the children turned 14, there was a big push, his father told him he had to choose a profession, become independent, because the father wants to stop paying child support."*

This financial precariousness forced one of them to stop the necessary psychological treatment of one of her children. At the hearing before the judge, the father had boasted that his mutual insurance company covered this type of expense, but in fact he had taken no steps to ensure that it was covered.

Pauperization is linked to food and housing conditions. One mother recounts how troubled she was on her first visit to the solidarity grocery, then got used to it, but lost 23 kg in a month and a half. After leaving the large family home, which the father continued to live in alone, she and the children were housed for two and a half years in an unhealthy, unheatable 20m² room, in which the children had to pee in plastic bottles. Another family spent months in a hotel and then in emergency accommodation.

Mothers' Voices in the Face of Justice

In the wake of complaints and injuries, investigation reports conclude that the father may have physically abused the children, but that they are safe in his home: the mother simply needs to be vigilant about her ex-partner's behavior, she is obliged to send the children to him on weekends and vacations, as stipulated by the judge. Some days, practitioners refuse to testify, even though they can see the effects of a father's acts of violence on a child's body. Other times, complaints are dismissed, because psychological violence is difficult to prove. It also happens that accusations are made against the mothers for their overprotective and fusional behavior. One day, randomly, one of them crosses paths with "*a fabulous gendarme*". He listens to her, helps her to come out of the denial in which she cowers like a wounded animal: yes, she has been a victim of domestic violence, yes, it's unacceptable. He explains her rights, listens to the child too, warns her that the case will be complicated, but that he will try and support her. This is so much more comforting than what she heard in another police station, where she was told it was up to her to calm down and get some rest. Is this the kind of help that is appropriate to offer to a woman who is a victim of domestic violence?

The details of the hours spent battling over visiting and custody rights would take up an entire book. It seems, from what we've heard, that an agreement between parents and a certain flexibility in their schedules has positive long-term effects. But what happens in the long term to father/child relationships when the children are forced to go to the father they don't want to see? *"He sees his father, more now than when he was a child. His father has never had parental authority, but has always been more or less present, even from afar, I often say a bit like a nice uncle or godfather. We've had no judgments except one, when I took the child out of school at the end of first grade, and his father stopped paying a meager child support, not wanting to find out about unschooling. But we came to an agreement before entering the judge's chambers, and when the judge asked if there were any other grounds for*

disagreement, there was no further request on his part. Today, there's a good relationship between them, as well as with his father's wife, whether it's between the child and her or between me and her, and the little brother they had." This child, from his mother's first marriage, is now a young adult.

When the two parents can't get along, the mother has two adversaries: the father and the institution. *"I don't know how to fight this big machine. Unschooling made me lose custody, the bond and the childhood of my children. I want to fight, because they're preventing me from being a mother. I know I'll never have my children again. I don't see how a judge, one day, is going to say: there's manipulation. It's been 10 years since the separation and my health has completely declined since 2018 as a result of the numerous procedures, lies and defamations. I recently received the right to the AAH – Allocation d'Adulte Handicapé - (Disabled Adult Allowance) and am obliged to stop my work, which I created and which I love, because I can't do it anymore. I can't even manage my day-to-day life any more, even when my children no longer live with me. After the professional and family burn-out, the "judicial burn-out"...?"* Another explains that she will go to the end of her fight, because she wants to be able to hold her head high in front of her children, to be able to tell them that she has done everything possible to return to unschooling. Moreover, several of them try to keep in touch with families still in unschooling and remain members of homeschooling families associations, despite their low budget, to continue supporting the cause, and one is still actively involved in it.

The mothers' assessment of the judges' decisions is extremely harsh. They feel that institutional violence is adding to domestic violence. One explains that since the father is unable to respect his custody and visitation rights, due to his professional activity, it is she, and the children, who have to adapt to his schedule. Another is exasperated: *"I can no longer plan a day, get up, go to bed, eat... he decides the content of my life through legal validation.*

I spend my days crying. It's unbearable. I went to court because I've experienced violence and so has my child, and the judge has given him back the power to decide on the lives of mother and child. Through this decision, the judge is dismissing the child's right to benefit from what is in his or her best interest. This external decision confirms the father's hold over the mother and changes nothing in her life, as he doesn't have the child during school periods."

The mothers' anger is matched by their incomprehension in the face of decisions they consider as absurd. One of them questions the way judges work: they seem to be unaware of the impact their decisions make. *"If judges took the time to read the files, the courts would be less congested. Given what our children have been through, and given that not all of them are resilient, the courts will be clogged up later. Justice perpetuates injustice and violence, and that's very serious. What kind of life do these judges have? What feedback do they get when they make a decision? They make decisions about people's lives, and then people have to deal with them! The first victims are the children, because they're not allowed to learn at their own pace. I wondered if judges and lawyers were friends outside of court."* In the case of one blended families, the mother rages against the judge, who in changing the custody arrangement, *"is not afraid of separating the siblings. She describes the confusing experience for the child she had from a previous union: when the others weren't there, he was alone in his room, and when they were there, he was all crazy, as if he'd been the youngest."*

Children's Voices in the Face of Justice

Janusz Korczak, the famous protector of children, wrote "... *but who would have the idea of asking the child for his opinion? What can he possibly have to say to us?"*

These children, whose parents have separated, to whom unschooling is authorized or forbidden, seem to have a lot to say.

Some have parents who are still tending to them, despite the separation. Dialogue and listening remain. Their words are heard. In one testimonial, the two children, from a previous union, asked to move in with their father to escape the violence of their mother's new partner. *"In view of what he was going through, the eldest child asked to move in with his father and go to middle school. He was 12. He entered 6th grade. The father agreed, and so did I. We're both smart. The children's best interests are our priority, and things went smoothly. I continued the unschooling with the second child, who was 9. When he was old enough to go to middle school, because of the violence, he also asked to go and move in with his father."* The parents have come to an agreement, without a court decision.

When parents separate, children sometimes choose sides. The father's or the mother's. *"Today, the eldest child has been living with his father for six months. At his request. The children have changed since the separation. The child wants to go to school in the new school year, starting in the tenth grade. It'll be a new group and the child wants to take the end of high school baccalauréat exam. I think this idea of school stems from the separation, from the fact that the children are no longer together on a daily basis. Finally, the younger child has also asked to go to school this fall. As parents, we tell them, if you're happy, we're happy. Since the separation, I've had no worries about the children being able to say what they want. Even though we're separated, we see each other and have a good relationship. It's as much for the children as for us."*

When the parents can not come to an agreement any longer, the child is sometimes auditioned. But isn't that an intimidating moment for a child? Then the child speaks according to the degree of fear that grips him or her. But if the fear is too intense, if it doesn't allow clear, intelligible and precise words to pass, or if a language disorder restricts the child's ability to express himself, then his speech is dismissed, it doesn't count. Sometimes, on the contrary, during a hearing, the child expresses himself very clearly, saying, firmly, that he

doesn't want to go to school. But in this case, several mothers confirm it, nothing is retained, the speech was too clear, it could only be maternal manipulation. And yet, when a hearing was held, rehearsed in advance with the father and during which the child spat out everything by heart, as he confessed to his mother, was there a judge to refuse to believe his speech?

Since his word is not believed, the child is left with just a few allies, a psychologist, who follows him, and dares to write a letter. *"The psychologist wrote a letter, saying that the child wasn't doing well at school, and that he wanted to go back to unschooling. She wrote another letter, a year and a half later, he's not feeling well at school. But the judge didn't take it into account."*

If his voice is unheard, the child tries to translate his discomfort into action. Hiding and then running away until he finds himself in an accident-prone situation, to avoid going to his father's house. But that doesn't work either. So it's the child's body that speaks. *"From the non-conciliation session onwards, the child was forced to go to his father's house. The child started to have emotional outbursts and ultimately became enuretic. The doctor said, this is terrible, I'm not surprised."* But nobody hears him. Except his mother.

So, what's left for the child, if the people who have power over his life don't want to listen to what he has to say? *"When something goes wrong with Daddy, I'm like a goldfish, I put it away in the back of my brain and forget about it,"* resigns a ten-year-old.

Judges' Decisions

The results of these interviews raise a number of questions around the legal institutions. Which word is listened to more? That of the person who hits the hardest? With fists or with words? What do judges base their decisions on? The very raw words of one of the mothers' lawyers shed a singular light on this question. *"The lawyer warned me that I had little chance of winning because homeschooling is seen as something unhealthy by judges. They think that the child is locked up at home, and they'll get upset if we give them any*

information, because then it's a big case. They won't read it, it bores them. Another lawyer told me that the case was lost in advance."

By reading the judgments handed down by the mothers, we can list the arguments they used as a basis for their decision to force the child to attend school. These arguments revolve around several axes.

The Parents' Behaviour.

Apparently, the lack of communication between the parents gives grounds to the court to send the child back to school (even if it did not prevent the practice of unschooling for several years before). Another assertion is the father's lack of availability. Indeed, if the father has custody of the child at a time other than weekends and vacations, how will he be able to have a professional life and spend time with his child, in particular ensuring his education? This type of argument needs to be analyzed from several angles: does the school function as a day-care center? What about the mother's professional activity?

Pedagogical presuppositions.

From this standpoint, the national educational system would be the only one that enables *the acquisition of fundamental skills and the continuation of socialization, higher education, a profession and a future*. Children educated outside school *may not be able to adapt to a conventional school system, nor have a baccalaureate, and therefore a future and a professional life*.

These presuppositions are in total contradiction with the results of international research within the field of unschooling (Gray, Riley 2022 a, b, Riley 2018, 2020).

Again, based on slightly different pedagogical presuppositions, these judges assume that the mother will not always have the necessary level, nor the required training, to teach her children, especially subjects such as mathematics, philosophy and foreign languages.

Here again, this type of argument demonstrates a total lack of understanding of unschooling

and the misconception that families are isolated, whereas they are in fact surrounded by resource people. Lastly, on a pedagogical level, the father's availability, it's not even mentioned, even though the father agreed fully with the choice of unschooling originally.

Two other, rather contradictory arguments were raised. In one ruling, the judge noted that the children of a family were involved in numerous sporting and cultural activities. But there were just too many of them, in his opinion. In another ruling, another judge felt that the children should stop unschooling and go to school, as it was *important for their openness to the world to get to know other educational systems*. Two questions immediately spring to mind: do the educational methods of teachers of sport, music or other socio-cultural practices have no value compared with school? And, was this other judge ever thinking of forcing children enrolled in public schools to attend alternative schools as well? Or even to be in unschooling, in order to open up to the world and *get to know other educational systems*?

Finally, when a judge concludes that a child is doing well at school, and that this therefore means he or she feels good at school, the verdict is a bit short-sighted. How many *good students* testify, in adulthood, to the suffering that was their schooling, or keep these wounds secret?

Two mothers attempted to enroll their children in private schools; one of the schools had a specific approach to education, while the other was a more traditional school, with a special course that the child was particularly fond of. In both cases, the judges ruled out the mother's request. In the first case, the father alone was given the right to enroll the children in the school of his choice, without needing the mother's approval. Why were these mothers' requests overruled? Is this how parental authority is achieved?

Judges can not be expected to be pedagogical experts, but why can't they be better informed before making a decision that has such an impact on a child's life? In a recent report (May 17, 2023), the UN Rapporteur on Human Rights, recalls the place of homeschooling in

the right to education. "*Home-schooling may therefore be considered as part of educational freedom, with families retaining the liberty to ensure the education of their children at home.*"

This reminds us the aforementioned comment by one of the mothers' lawyers. Is there any truth in this?

This first part of our exploratory research depicts the judges in a light that is disturbing enough, although incomplete. How can professionals, who are supposed to represent justice and who have an enormous power over the lives of citizens, render their decisions on such poor means of reflection? The mothers are very harsh on them, but what will the fathers' word reveal about this profession? Will their judgment be the same or different? Would judges be more nuanced in their decisions if they could get more context or literature about out-of-school instruction in general, and unschooling in particular? Wouldn't it be urgent to try a pioneering experiment in this field?

Results and Outlook

The results of this exploratory research highlights a number of issues: conjugal violence, neurodiversity, the role of mothers, the failure to listen to what children have to say, the foundations of judges' decisions. The high number of mothers who have been victims of conjugal violence, physical and/or psychological—nine out of ten—is striking. Do these mothers have a particularly vulnerable profile? Have they shared part of their lives with fathers coming from a specifically violent backgrounds, or was violence induced by the separation? Do all separations lead to this type of behavior, and is such violence exclusive to fathers towards mothers, or do mothers also use it towards their ex-partners?

The neurodiversity of children, and to a lesser extent the neurodiversity of mothers, also needs to be considered. Does conventional schooling offer all the guarantees these children need to flourish, real and effective care for their needs and adequate teacher training? A recent study by Gina Riley (2023) shows that in the United States, children's neurodiversity

is one of the reasons for choosing unschooling. And on both sides of the Atlantic, parents note a difference in their child's development depending on the mode of education chosen.

The place of the mother, caught between domestic and institutional violence, professional life and poverty, taking on a large part of their children's education and upbringing, but excluded from certain decisions like incompetent adults, is really challenged. Why is it that, in the event of parental disagreement, the father alone can enroll the child in the school of his choice, when this mode of education, originally accepted by both parents, is now forbidden to the mother? How can the father accept, on his own, that his child is moved to a higher grade, when the child does not even have the required level, when this level, moreover, would result from his schooling and not, from unschooling? How can a father allow himself to have medical procedures carried out on the children, without informing the mother, when both have parental authority? Why is the word of a child, expressing a choice other than that of the majority of the population—to be educated in unschooling rather than at school—is merely heard as an echo of the mother's manipulation?

In French family law, there is a notion called “*actes usuels de la vie courante*” (*customary acts in everyday life*) that should help protect the child's specific mode of education. Why then, at a court hearing a few weeks after a family's forced schooling, are the years of unschooling worth nothing compared to a few weeks of schooling?

An important point to emphasize, with regard to the September 2022 law, is that it is now almost impossible for these children, despite their request, to return to unschooling. Indeed, authorization is now only given for a maximum of two years. However, despite the fact that one of the mothers had received an authorization from the school district to continue with unschooling, she received a court decision obliging her to send her child to school in the summer of 2023 anyway. Is this hierarchy of administrative decisions really based on the child's well-being?

The image of fathers reflected in this article is neither uniform nor definitive. Indeed, it appears from the mothers' testimonies that some maintain respectful relationships with both their ex-partner and their child(ren), and continue to assume their parental role. For others, relationships are more conflictual. These portraits of fathers will be supplemented in the next part of this exploratory research in which their views will be heard. Paternal single-parent families are statistically less numerous in France than maternal single-parent families. They exist nevertheless, and are sometimes also unschoolers. What happens when they separate from the mother of their children? Do the mothers require to send their child(ren) back to school after the separation?

These questions, and many others, may well be answered, or new ones may arise, thanks to the next parts of this exploratory research. Indeed, what will the fathers' own words show? Fathers wanting to continue unschooling, and mothers forcing them to send their children to school? Mothers equipped with power versus fathers relegated to a subordinate role?

Extending the question to schooling families, does the separation of the parental couple also reveal the power stakes of one vengeful parent against another, through changes in the place of education, from private school to public school, or vice versa, or from home to a boarding school?

What is the attitude of judges to unschooling fathers? For them too, a daily act in a child's life—namely, unschooling for years—will carry less weight than a month and a half of school when it comes to passing judgment?

How will relations evolve between fathers and the children they force, against their will, to go to school and come to visit them? What kind of adults will these children become? And what about the mothers? How will their situation evolve, their psychological state, their health, their material situation: income, housing?

Monitoring these families over time could help us answer these questions, and assess the short- and long-term effects of judges' decisions, as well as those of legislators. The testimonies of mothers who have lived through two marital separations show that the experience was different for them and their children. The evolution of a situation cannot be determined in advance, but depends on the behavior of the people involved.

Already, the suspicion of instrumentalization of unschooling is emerging. It needs to be refined by further observations to be fully substantiated. The need to set up an educational information structure for judges seems pressing, as does the need for educational expertise, in the same way that psychiatric expertise is sometimes required during a trial. The modalities of such a structure could be the subject of a pilot project and its evaluation, taking into account both the family's well-being and the financial costs of forced schooling: psychological follow-up, repeated medical visits, the mother's inability to work and the need to rely on minimum social benefits, diagnosis and treatment of neurodiversity, whereas unschooling makes it possible to manage this particularity, training of personnel and implementation of support measures for these children in schools.

Conclusion

The aim of this exploratory research was to open up new paths for inquiries, and this goal has been achieved, with many promising leads to explore. Two unexpected characteristics emerge from the mothers' interviews: domestic violence and neurodiversity. This neurodiversity is also found, amplified, in their children. What conclusions can we draw? None at the present stage of this research, which is still in its infancy. Of the 23 children concerned, 7 are aged 16 and over, and as a result, they are no longer subject to compulsory schooling; 2 have decided, of their own accord, to start school in September 2023; 2 are continuing with unschooling; 2 were informed, during the summer of 2023, that they would have to start school in September. Of these two children, one has de facto

authorization to continue with unschooling; 3 are enrolled in an alternative school and are thriving there. There are still 7 children whose situations are unclear. 2 are tossed back and forth between their parents, while 5 others, belonging to two different families, are unhappy at school and have been asking, in vain, that they may no longer go. Will they ever be heard or listened to? One of them has a dream... *"If we have any money after the divorce, we buy a house more than 35 km from the first school, and even if our home is unsanitary, to allow us to homeschool again, and if we can't find any, we buy a camper van to travel the world and not go back to school and follow the swallows on their migration, all the way to southern Africa."*

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