



## SYMPOSIUM

A dialogue on core qualities and practices needed in education  
Driebergen, 8th & 9th February 2017

### *Beautiful complexity* Reflection by Ruth Besselink

The Unfolding symposium showed a careful search for balance between child-following education and guiding structure, or more general for the right relationship. We started with a search for common grammar and vocabulary so as to understand each other, and we ended with the personal narrative as a way to connect and read between the lines and understand perhaps despite the language that separates us.

As former art therapist I love watching and seeing. With language I have always had a more complicated relationship. Language intrigues, but often also confuses me. Words are spoken not intended, or intentions are expressed but not given the adequate words. The paraphrase of Ludwig Wittgenstein '*the limits of my language are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for.*' This triggered me when, during the conference I saw many of us searching for the words to describe a profound knowing. To me, searching words for the knowing without language is like the mysterious domain of poetry and art. In that light the language is much less of a limit perhaps.

Children learn the system of language when they grow up, but when they are young you can observe their struggle with the meaning of words. Last week my son asked "mom, what does "*gewoon*" mean?" *Gewoon* in Dutch is perhaps best translated with 'just', or with 'like'. In that moment I felt inept, because I have no real answer and probably as many questions as he when I think about what it really means in all its facets. I simply can't always explain the logic of the language or the systems, so I asked him what he thought "*gewoon*" means. He hardly hesitates and says: "*gewoon* is what people say when they don't really know what they are saying."

This profound and crystal clear observation used for reading intentions is that knowing without language. A capability that tends to disappear when we assimilate into the language system and its unwritten rules.

My five year old reminded me of how important we as educators are in the learning process of meaning making. Children do not learn about how the world works from their grammar classes, but much more from observation of our example.

Their radar for the hidden meaning, the knowing without language, is razor sharp. They detect the miniscule sigh of the teacher when John is distracted or when Mary made the same mistake again. They see and feel the judgments that teachers and parents hold, especially when they concern the child.

While growing up their radar and intuition tends to get overshadowed by the use of ready made responses to standards and systems. If language is the limit of our mind, and so the limit to our relationship with the world, then a grammar oriented schooling limits our relationships to what we can put in words.

So what do we exemplify, and what do we express in who we are? What do children observe in us when we transmit our convictions and values and try to simplify or explain the world? And why do we simplify the world in the first place? How come we rather not deal with its complexities and interdependencies, but try to give the easy answer. Perhaps we feel inept before the many things we do not understand. What I am interested in is what this does to our relationships with students.

I have been privileged to learn about the role of relationships from very complex people in the heavily procedural environment of the forensic psychiatric clinic. In a place where everything goes according to protocol to 'ensure' safety and promote "progress", systems overrule human judgement. I realised that 'safety' and human growth were what appeared as a result of respect and an interest in the other's wellbeing, as a result, in other words, of a relationship.

The most difficult part was to connect to and accept people with such horrifying past, views, and behaviour. Dealing with their complexity requires the most humane skills to observe through the language and behaviour, and to see intensions and needs.

Dealing with their extremes also gave me the opportunity to learn that the best approach was not a matter of controlling, correcting or to simplify. That would only increase a one-sided spiral downwards. Instead it was a matter of bringing balance by providing what they were lacking: a relationship.

In my opinion an identical process appears in education. Where guidelines insure that knowledge is being taught and tests guarantee students know the right answers. Protocol and regulation help to organize our interactions, but they should never replace a relationship or take away initiative and personal responsibility.

And we have a personal responsibility to be aware of what we express without language and to connect with what we observe. Learning and growth happens 'between the lines', in relationships of respect and interest.

What is between the lines becomes observable in a narrative. One narrative of Unfolding for me is that we are reminded of our most human qualities of intuition, trust and relationship, and found there in the instruments for bringing balance in what the child needs and what the educator needs. I don't believe we need a new language but just to be more nuanced and responsible in our expression. This means we have no ready answers. Not to the students, not to the teachers, and perhaps not to whom we are accounting to.

A relationship is not a tangible response, but it is the only sensible response to the deep complexity of the human unfolding. Education is all encompassing and therefore cannot be simplified to one side of the story. Let us practice and learn to love the uncertainty, complexity and vulnerability that come with it.

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