



SYMPOSIUM

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

What spoke to me and what made me think further...

Reflection of prof. Ferre Laevers

There is a lot I can't let go, a lot that spoke to me and still is on my mind. I feel an urge to linger on these experiences, words and meanings. Upfront are three clusters of meanings that I feel most enriched with when reflecting on of the Symposium

How 'narratives' bring the whole person in

The first theme is linked to the word 'narrative'. Indeed the concept is known as a valuable approach in the field of qualitative methodology. But what I realize more than ever, is how much the dominant approaches in educational research and innovation, tend to step over the person and to reduce him or her to an 'instrument' in the improvement of practice. The symposium format, in a convincing way, helped us to understand that behind every person there is story we need to connect with, we need to hear and encourage: it started with the life story of the young student and of the mayor of Rotterdam, the clips and the interviews, the personal experiences and beliefs expressed by the commenting researchers, and also the 'wise persons' in the film '*Down to earth*'. I realize now how supporting development of people, from children and youngsters, up to adults implies time and a safe space to create genuine encounters in which they can step in as unique personalities. The energy that is generated from that is immense and also necessary for the 'unfolding of their potential'.

How far 'sharing responsibility' can go

The second word on my symposium vocabulary list is '**shared responsibility**'. That really hit me – thanks to the many ways the concept has been illustrated.

The clips from the Laterna Magica, the Titus Brandsmalyceum and L'école Singelijn and the light shed on it by their representatives during the interviews, were, for me, most fascinating. Because what they showed was a kind of spirit and practice I have always dreamt of and I thought would still have to be proven 'possible' in the actual context of education. Even if one can only get a full picture from these settings by visiting them, we got enough evidence to categorize these as exceptional. Organizing an elementary school (with children from 4 to 12) based on communities of learning with mixed age groups with a high level of responsibility given to children, organizing child participation in a way that takes them seriously (including job interviews), feeding the process of development by taking 'curiosity' as a major entrance, sitting together with student representatives to discuss the results of a school evaluation and hearing that these youngsters from now on will also have a voice in the selection procedure for new teachers... all these images were endorsed by the authentic narratives in the interviews.

A major contribution for me in this respect, came from Günther Opp when he described a conflictual context with one child getting isolated and rejected by his classmates because of inappropriate behavior. Günther spoke hit a cord when he made clear that we do not need a 'tribunal' here, by which a person has to be put in a shamed position and sanctioned. Instead, this class or community of students has to be invited by the teacher with the message that "WE have a problem" followed by the challenging question: "How are you as a group able to help this child?" and as part of that: "Who can speak for him (and express how he must feel)?" The end of the story is promising and shows how respecting the child's dignity can lead to a restoration of the group climate. What the boy appreciated most is that "his peers implicated him again in their play".

In respect to this topic Michael Fielding's reference to the concept of 'a joyful interdependence of young people and adults' added a lot for me. Especially the advocacy for a different approach of so called 'parent's evenings' by turning the role of the teacher into 'supporting the students to create that moment' showed the implications of true child participation.

The topic of sharing responsibility popped up again when the fourth strand - on leadership – was addressed. Here someone suggested not to use the term 'leadership' but to speak of 'shared responsibilities' – even if this includes that the responsibilities of the members of a team can differ.

It is true that from the earliest conceptualization, child initiative, freedom of choice of activities (even for babies and toddlers) has been a main pillar of experiential education. We certainly contributed a lot to the implementation of the 'open framework approach' (introduced by High Scope in the sixties) – in which a high level of initiative of both adults and children are seen as the key. For us this is not about a kind of balance between the input of 'both sides'. Our criterion is the amount of synergy that comes out of the exchange. Typical for an 'open framework approach' is that "we don't know who is programming who. Is it the child or the adult?". Nevertheless, despite of our track record on giving children more room for initiative, the symposium enlightened me when it comes to this topic.

How Wise Men and Wise Women can awaken us

A third meaningful insight emerged from the evening session with the film *Down to Earth*, Rolf Winters'¹ introduction and the plenary Q&A and discussion following it. The film provided a profound encounter with exceptional persons – Wise Men and Women from different cultures - that provoked in me, to start with, a feeling of modesty or humility before so much wisdom. They all in their own ways transferred in a convincing way a far reaching sense of connectedness. Silence was the most appropriate response I felt, before such a body of essential truth, rooted in a very long (oral) tradition. Far away from our modern life styles – and at the same time far from being 'primitive'. But that was only the beginning.

In a next move of thoughts we wondered what the recognition of the value of this (spiritual) vision could mean for today's and future generations, and particularly for education. Here I felt confusion. How can we develop, or at least safeguard this basic attitude in the actual context where contact with nature has become so distorted or, at the least so scarce compared to a life where the cycle of seasons permeates people lives? Or as one of us worded: "What can we do with this in the view of our overcrowded hectic lives in our urban areas?"

An anecdote by Rolf worked as a catalyst, where he mentioned how a parent told him in private how influential seeing the movie has been for his son – who had a lot of difficulties to cope with life and the school system. "This is me", the son said, referring to the Wise Persons he had watched. As a 'hyper sensitive' person, he could recognize how much his perception of the world came close to the world as depicted in those rich narrative.

¹ www.downtoearthfilm.com

This was very helpful for me to broaden my scope. Apart from admiration for the spirit of these Wise Women and Men and instead of the acceptance of the nearly impossibility to give it a chance in our evolving cultures, I felt that the core message had to be rephrased. This is all about opening up our capacity to grasp realities. Now, this could be narrowed to a kind of 'sixth sense' or a mythical approach, or even a para-normal dimension, a road I'm not ready to follow today. Instead of that I feel that it can be captured by a call to break the supremacy of abstract logical and superficial (reductionist) thinking and opening up the intuitive dimension in human cognition.

The experiential view on competencies links very well with this epistemological approach. We can document how intuitive understanding or intelligence has to be valued as a quality, not only for the social sciences but at least as much in the field of science and technology. In a nutshell: the best engineers are not in the first place the ones with the highest IQ's, but are those who combine a certain level of abstract logical thinking with a high level of imagination. It is from the capacity to represent, sense, figure out, connect, empathize with physical phenomena, that understanding of processes and 'smart' solutions can emerge.

Going back to our key question about wisdom, we can now connect with other fundamental concepts. One of them is 'mindfulness' where we realize how much 'knowledge' or 'understanding' is embodied – meaning: is present as felt senses in our stream of experiences. Dweck's 'growth mindset' – only mentioned ones in the symposium – pops up as a strong advocacy for an open mind. Curiosity and a sense of wonder are also at the center of this plea to open up minds. I was happy with Rolfs confirmation of my hypothesis that artistic expression (in fact any form of expression, alike the 100 languages in the Reggio approach) is strengthening the capacity of a human being to grasp meanings that emerge from the interactions with 'the world'. The experiential approach here is very much inspired by Gendlin's insight that expression is not a sheer 'bringing outside what is carried inside and ready to be shared', but that the act of expression is a process in which the person (only then) can get a sharp awareness of the felt senses that are floating in his stream of experiences. Someone expressing something is impressing him or herself in the most intense way. That is exactly what I feel in this moment, while I am trying to grasp with words what is laying in me as 'unfinished' meanings. Expression is like giving birth to feelings, perceptions, experiences, fantasies and insights that we carry with us. In fact all meaningful experiences bring us in a state of pregnancy. We are urged to 'deliver'. Words and all artistic forms are the tools. A warm, open, listening and responsive surrounding can work as midwives...

If this can be the conclusion of this reflection ignited by ‘Down to Earth’, we are ready to inspire educational practice. We now realize that children with their open and natural approach of surroundings have something to contribute to our understanding of the world. Giving them a voice, therefore has to go beyond the respect for children’s rights. They can help us. Do we still need the concept of an ‘asymmetrical relation’ when it comes to pedagogy?

This conclusion has also implications for research. It connects with an insight that has accompanied me since 1972 when I concluded my master in educational sciences in Leuven: the main obstacle for the ‘advancement of science’ especially in the human sciences is the ‘reduction’ of complex realities and the lack of disposition (attitude and competence) to ‘let the real thing speak’. That comes down to the core idea that the main instrument in research is the researcher and his or her capacity to ‘imagine’ what happens in persons, and in the complex interactions between people.

Towards a new vocabulary and grammar for education

I liked the idea to revisit our ‘vocabulary and grammar’. All along the sessions I took note of ‘words’ and expressions that were used and reflected another approach, even paradigm, than the one that has been labeled as ‘learnification’. In the same line, ‘delivery of lessons’, ‘impact’, ‘leadership’ has been questioned or put aside by some of us – while alternatives gradually filled our minds.

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| Activism | research driven by a mission |
| Asymmetrical | supposed to be the case for ‘pedagogical relations’ |
| Authenticity | |
| Authorship | suggested as an alternative for ‘ownership’ |
| Basic needs | to feel in control (agency) and to belong |
| Bringing oneself | we always bring ourselves in the dialogues we have |
| Children’s rights | |
| Congruency | |
| Connecting | imagining how the other views the world = hard work |
| Cooperative learning | Between children, teachers and between both |

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| Dignity | to keep the other out of the 'shamed position' |
| Disrespect for rules | an artistic, innovative, original, approach |
| Dissonance | unexpected student's responses are fruitful |
| Doing by not doing | |
| Emancipation | children's rights, participation |
| Envie de travailler ensemble | |
| Ethic of care | |
| Generosity | |
| Growth mindset | openness to the world, fascination, driven to explore |
| How to live a good life | as a goal for education |
| Integrity | professional integrity |
| Interdependence | of teachers and children/students |
| Knowing each other well | being 'curious' about the other (children, adults...) |
| Learnification | a reductionist, linear rational approach to learning |
| Learning from the student | to know if you approach students in the right way |
| Life | learning for life – learn how to face life |
| Liking | I like to see the children and their happy faces |
| Love | openness (awareness of the whole person) combined with a caring attitude |
| Mask | help students to take off their masks |
| Mining | the mainstream, hardcore research tradition |
| Mistakes | to be allowed to make mistakes |
| Narratives | |
| Observation | giving space to teachers to observe |
| Passion | for what you do |
| Physical awareness | of the positive climate in the interaction |

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| Radical antecedents | respect for and inspiration from former innovators |
| Reading a child | |
| Reinventing yourself | taking new roles as teacher and students |
| Self-enquiry | |
| Shared purpose | inspires thinking and working together |
| Shared responsibility | |
| Softness and strong heart | a beautiful, powerful combination |
| Soul | connecting: getting closer to somebodies soul |
| Space | giving space to all actors |
| Symmetrical relation | in any social rapport also between children & adults |
| Synergy | precious moments where interaction is creative |
| Triologue | from dialogue to taking on board reality as third party |
| Unsafe learning | a safe haven for unsafe learning, for adventure |
| Vulnerability | feeling (un)secure as a state to be valued |
| Z – rejected vocabulary | Some suggested to abandon words like: impact, delivery (of lessons), ownership, accountability... |

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