



SYMPOSIUM

A dialogue on core qualities and practices needed in education
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Teaching for human unfolding in a time of fundamental questioning

Reflection by Thieu Besselink

I recently attended the Unfolding conference in Driebergen of NIVOZ and the Learning for Wellbeing foundation. We saw many practices of teachers and educators getting to grips with something I would call the emergent nature of human unfolding. For anyone at home in educational history imagines of a romantic Rousseauian movement cropped up (see Maarten Huygen in NRC of Jan 13). Understandably so, because much of the conversations concerned the conditions for the child's autonomy, and the teacher's role not as expert but as enabling partner in meaning making. But what emerged from the Unfolding conference was not a romantic idea at all.

The core of today's call for self-directed learning, authentic relationships, and emergent curricula is not the primacy of the child, but the complexity of the child's development, accompanied by the realization that knowledge and the world are not neatly organized in linear experiences or disciplined subjects. Everything is interconnected, which makes education all encompassing, fully including the *whole* child, and the *whole* world.

Two realizations, each asking to be reflected in an equally encompassing teacher education. In times of fundamental questioning, when the foundations of our economic, social, and political life appear untenable, and when teachers and students are struggling to relate their educational experience to what is most important to them, it becomes easier to see what it takes to be a guide to the world for the next generation: a lot.

I had to think of two illustrations for possible ways of navigating the complexity of the child's unfolding and the increasing awareness of an interconnected world. The

first story tells about a teacher's ability to bear uncertainty while standing for professional judgment.

When I was in the 6th grade I did not read or write. I just wouldn't. You can all imagine the alarm bells that had been going off in and around school. What was wrong with this child? But before I was given a special label, my teacher (Sarian) called all the teachers of the school together and asked them to observe me. For a month they would come together every Friday, share observations and meditate on my case over the weekends before they decided what to do. Finally her decision was to do nothing.

Yes, *she* decided. Not the parents not the school leadership, nor any protocol. What she found out is that it wasn't that I was stupid, I was just doing something else and I didn't have a good reason to read. When I would be ready to read and write, I would, she was convinced. In the meantime she would provoke and seduce me with possibilities for wanting to read or write. Years later she came to my PhD defense. A few weeks before I had met her by chance and she told me the story. This was a profound moment, not because I turned out to be able to read and write quite all right, but because until that moment I had never known that I could not read or write. No one ever told me!

She took a risk, broke a protocol, and created a space for unfolding. But perhaps more deeply, she tied her fate to mine. The commitment she made in her judgment reveals a powerful dedication to my well-being. Only later when I had the privilege to educate students and teachers myself I would start to understand her ability to bear uncertainty and the complexity of human growth. We could see it as a romantic belief in the innate ability of the child, but instead this example reveals the ability to respond to a particular child with a particular and unscripted kind of guidance.

For me the second illustration shows how, in many ways, teachers are doors to the world. It is what they stand for and how they live it that transpires, and it is how they orchestrate a student's experience of the world that forms the student. I try to give the teachers and students I educate a complex experience of the world in order to learn on the most fundamental level what it means to be an educator in this world and equip them with the necessary sensibilities and skills. My university students, for instance, may learn by spending time in a refugee center to find out what the people there need the most in order to get a sense of autonomy and belonging in their lives. Then organising workshops by which refugees and locals collectively learn by improving the neighborhood, sharing food, and enjoying a party for instance.

What does this have to do with teacher education you may ask? In reality the depth of personal connection, the world awareness, and the community stewardship required for this kind of work are essential for a teacher in a globalising and polarising world. They are hard to learn, especially in a classroom, leave alone in university away from school. An experience as such moves from teaching disciplines to embodying questions that matter. It provides a wealth of material to explore learning for a democracy for instance, the developing of personal and collective

values, bridging and learning from difference, managing learning communities, personal leadership and self-knowledge, collective creativity, creating empowering narratives, dealing with incompleteness and not knowing, and it allows for experiment, etc.

In particular an experimental and iterative approach allows us to know what to do when we do not know what to do. A skill and disposition teachers of today cannot do without. And to make my last point, Especially this kind of embodied learning from urgent societal situations gives a chance to 'teach' systemic sensibility.

We are living in blissful ignorance of the devastating origins of our wealth or deprivation, because we have never truly learned to understand on a more than abstract level what global interdependency means, and what its consequences are. We become part of the world only to the extent that we experience its relationships to our lives. It is therefore a moral imperative to develop a systemic sensibility. This means that one of the main responsibilities of education today is to design experiences that allow for the development of such sensibility.

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“As an educator I take it as my art and craft to see the invisible, and to create the conditions for its unfolding. The story I choose to be a part of is one in which teachers, students, and communities are a force for human growth and social change.”

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