



SYMPOSIUM

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

If we don't take the *whatfor* into account, the *how* will be instrumental

Reflection of Joop Berding

*“It is a simple truth of human experience that
no one individual can see reality in its totality;
hence, we are but slaves to limited perspectives”*

Dale Crozier, ‘Gaining Understanding’, *Insights*, 1991

The idea, or fact, that no one on his or her own can oversee reality, whatever that is, is a good reason to come together with as many people as possible, and share as many and diverse experiences, and insights as possible. Or to use a phrase of Hannah Arendt: ‘to go visiting’ each other’s experiences, meanings and ‘theories’. And this is what we did on those two days at the NIVOZ / L4WB symposium. The design of the symposium made it possible to listen to, speak and dialogue with many different people, some of whom I already knew (or ‘knew’ from the social media) and some who were new to me (and vice versa). Below I give a reflection on something that came up during the symposium, and on something that in my mind need further discussion and elaboration. But let me, as a little narrative, begin by sharing an experience I had some months ago, but which has its roots much much earlier.

In 1962 I was eight years old, and in 2nd grade, where I was taught by my schoolmaster Mr Zonneveld the ins-and-outs of reading, writing, maths, and geography. Now, last year I was in a museum in my home town, The Hague, and to my surprise I saw there and recognized Mr Zonneveld, a man now in his late eighties. I thought, well, why not say hello? As I approached him, he looked at me, and without giving me a chance to say anything, held out his hand and said: “Joop Berding!” I was really stunned: a schoolmaster who must have

worked with hundreds of pupils in all these years, and who remembers one of them, me, immediately *by name*, after more than half a century...

That's the power of education ...

And now for some reflections. It was great to watch the film clips and see colleagues at work. They were doing a great job, but a question kept popping up in my mind, i.e. why are we so in awe of these examples? What has happened in the past three or four decades of educational politics and policies that we find these practices – like having children actively engage in all kinds of practical activities, or having a conversation about a topic, etc. – so 'special'?

Because to my mind, we watched examples of what education should be like, 'normally': active children, inspirational teachers, dialogues. For some reason, something has been lost on the way in the past years. On this issue I was touched by Michael Fielding's plea that we do not forget history. The history of education is full of great ideas, and narratives about practices. For instance, when you think of a school as (also) a laboratory where children can experiment, and do (re)search and make great discoveries, there is name and a practice that comes to one's mind immediately and that is of course John Dewey's (laboratory!) school – Chicago 1894-1904. And Dewey for that matter was heavily influenced by the activity principles of Pestalozzi and Froebel, two of the most important pedagogues in the Western canon. So to my mind, education today should be aware of the immense cultural and spiritual tradition of which they are a part, no matter how 'innovative' they either appear to be, or pretend to be. Any education that defines itself as 'education' (and not e.g. as training or disciplining) cannot but be based on this kind of principles.

A second reflection I'd like to phrase, and frame in one word: *whatfor?* Looking back on our two days I feel that we've spoken and thought a lot about the *how* and the *what* of education (and also a bit on the *where*). But I think we've neglected the aspect of whatfor somewhat. Education to my mind needs to attend to the whatfor, especially because there many forces in society that have specific non-pedagogical views and whatfors in mind for our pupils. For the bussines-world education is a means to acquire well-trained and complying workers-as-consumers; for governments in neoliberal societies like most western ones there is the ideal of the 'autonomous' self-supportive citizen as the desired outcome. But education deals with other matters and is motivated in a different way: with subjectivity and intersubjectivity, with culture and relationships, with age old traditions in which we introduce children so that *they* may appear as subjects in the world (again Arendt). If we don't take the whatfor into account, the how will be instrumental, in the pejorative meaning, and the what (the curriculum) will be frickle. And it might seem that *any* 'potential' might be 'unfolded' – a contention that we as educators would probably not support. So summing up, I think we need further discussion of the frame of reference from which to judge what potential is worth unfolding, and become manifest, and which had better be kept what it is: just a 'potential'.

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