

Resentment, Disappointment and the Ceaseless Vitality of Teachers and Pedagogy – an Essay

Moira von Wright

In *Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching*, the American educationist David T. Hansen writes that educational inquiry continually returns to the same kinds of questions and concerns, albeit in different manifestations, and that to ‘those who dream of a last word or of final insight into such questions, this state of affairs can feel frustrating or even maddening’¹. Hansen thereby points at an important aspect of education: the negative impression it tends to have in certain areas. For a teacher who loves one’s work and is interested in developing both morally and professionally, it is difficult to grasp or accept the anger and resentment that education awakens among different people. It took me many years to understand why education provokes such emotions, and why the Swedish academic setting, more than other such settings in the Nordic countries, is so aggressive towards education in general and the academic discipline of education in particular (sv. pedagogik)². In addition to being the name of a scientific field, the Swedish term pedagogik describes the art and practice of educating, teaching and learning, and human flourishing – and reflection upon these issues. In this

¹ Hansen, 2001, p. xi.

² For a thorough account of the Swedish discipline “pedagogik”, see Nilsson Sjöberg, ed., 2018a.

essay I distinguish between education on the one hand, which designates the overall structure, organisation, policy, history and culture of education and the research on these questions, including pedagogy, and pedagogy on the other hand, which encircles both the practice of and the research on the very acts and situations where teaching and learning, upbringing and self-formation occur. Research in pedagogy is thus often developed in relation to teacher education and the upbringing and education of children and young people. Max van Manen provides a clue to this meaning of the word:

The simple point is this: it is pedagogy that makes a crucial difference in a child's life. Pedagogy involves us in distinguishing actively and/or reflectively what is good, life enhancing, and supportive from what is not good or damaging in the ways that we act, live, and deal with children.³

Taking as my starting point the insight from Hansen that the last word about education cannot be said, and that this can be infuriating for some, I will develop a discussion about the 'bashing', or attacking, of the field of education at large, and research(ers) in pedagogy in particular, with brief instances from my own life – or, as some might prefer to say, with the input of anecdotal evidence. I will start at the beginning: namely, the year in which I arrived in Sweden.

Teachers and researchers in pedagogy under attack

Today, twenty-five years later, I still have vivid memories of my first year in Stockholm, when I proudly told people that I was a Finnish primary school teacher. I had been a classroom teacher for around twelve years by that time, and I was not prepared to be questioned about my choice of work or my ability to do it, and even less to be mauled by strangers who knew nothing about me or about schools from a professional point of view. In my home country the teacher had a socially and professionally respected position and naively I took it for granted that this would be the case in the neighbouring country Sweden too, considering our

³ van Manen, 2012, p. 10.

common history and similar societies.⁴ I particularly remember a confrontation with a hairdresser in the spring of 1993, during my first visit to that hair salon. She was new to me, I was new to her, and she was keen to find subjects to chat about and to get to know me. We talked about the weather, different kinds of haircuts, pets and many other things. We were building a relationship. She had a steady professional grip, and I felt secure in her hands. However, within a few minutes, the situation had changed totally; I wanted to escape, but obviously could not. What had happened? We had started talking about teachers and schools.

‘What work do you do?’ the hairdresser asked me. ‘I am a teacher’, I answered. ‘School is terrible’, she quickly replied. I noticed that she had become upset. I felt her grip around my neck tighten, and I sensed the edge of the scissors on my skin. Violently, she pulled my hair and said: ‘Teachers nowadays do not do their work, they are simply no good. There is no discipline in the schools, the kids can behave any way they want, and they don’t learn anything. I think that teachers must...’ The hairdresser went on talking about what was wrong with the teachers and with the schools, and suggesting how things should actually be handled and what the teachers should do. I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable. At first, I tried to explain what teaching is, describe the subtlety of teachers’ work and defend the public school; however, it was like throwing fuel on a fire. Eventually, I stopped answering her questions with anything other than a mumble, and just sat there wishing that the situation would come to an end. When I paid and left, we said a cold goodbye to each other. I did not return. The situation left me confused: hadn’t my neighbour reacted in a similar way when I said that I was a teacher? And the taxi driver...? Why were they so upset about teachers? Although I did not yet fully grasp the pattern, I had learnt a lesson: never tell anybody in Stockholm that you are a teacher, unless you want to be scolded.

I wondered why everybody was so distressed about Swedish schools. Why did so many people seem to dislike teachers? On

⁴ Simola, 2015.

what grounds did they believe that they had the answers to the (alleged) problems? Were they pointing at true problems in the schools, or were they just habitually attacking the education system? Fortunately, I was not turned down by the critical attitudes I encountered towards teachers and schools. I was a newcomer and an immigrant, so I didn't take it personally. On the contrary, I felt a growing interest in the conditions for teaching and learning, which triggered questions about the work of teachers and pedagogical relations that I had already considered during my time as a student and young teacher. It also roused new questions, such as how these problems could be framed and understood. The emotional turmoil I met made me curious about contemporary research in the field of education; I found a lot of interesting scientific work in that field in the library of the Stockholm Institute of Education, which was within walking distance of my new home. Ultimately, I decided to put aside my plan to write a thesis in history, and instead to become a researcher in the field of education – in questions concerning pedagogy. Little did I know that I was stepping onto a path where my words and actions might be read and appreciated by students and teachers from 'within', but would be deliberately misread and attacked by researchers from the 'outside'.

This essay mainly evolves around the critique against the discipline of education that comes from parts of the Swedish scientific community. First, however, the link between scientific critique and public frustration concerning schools and education at large should be mentioned. For example, this link can be seen in the media, where academics fish for sympathy for their points of view by picking on colleagues or scientific perspectives that, from their perspective, threaten the ideology that they represent. An unprovoked attack on me in one of the biggest Swedish newspapers a few years ago can serve as an example⁵. This newspaper article condemned me – a professor, vice chancellor and “pedagogue” – for spreading ‘heresy’, and demanded that I should be instantly stopped in my tracks. The tone of the piece implied that the false doctrines of pedagogues (researchers in

⁵ Ingvar, Sturmark and Wikforss, 2015.

pedagogy) were dangerously spilling over into schools. Pluralism, postmodernism, feminism and social constructivism etc. were attacked as anti-intellectual, and as equally leading to relativism and to the denial of historical and scientific facts. My mail was immediately overloaded by messages from unknown people who saw an opportunity to join the mob and hate (me). They wrote things such as ‘shame on you, you bitch’, and ‘...it’s your fault...’. Surprised colleagues who knew my work and knew that I was working within quite different theoretical perspectives than those that had been insinuated in the newspaper, asked me if I should not defend myself publicly. At that time, however, I refrained. Although I might have expected a fair and argumentative treatment from other academics, albeit from other sciences and viewpoints than my own, I felt that the critique was built on deceptive fabrications and accusations, and on ill-theorized understandings of postmodernism – a hopeless starting point for any sort of discussion. This was an attack against pluralism and critical thinking, and it included a deliberate misreading of the critical problematization of values in school subjects. Even though I did not actually speak from the acclaimed ‘postmodern’ position that they attacked, it would have been unjust towards my colleagues, who seriously develop research from those perspectives, to make a point of saying so. In hindsight, however, I regret not answering to the debate. Few academic voices publicly defend the research field of education and the need for critical thinking, which gives the impression that there is no strength in it – and a projected weakness tends to invite further aggression.

Looking back, I can see that this attack on researchers in pedagogy, which was to be followed by many similar attacks, came from a small group in the scientific community. The attack was part and parcel of a larger movement of critique from scientism and secular humanism against the humanities, the ‘soft’ sciences. The word scientism describes a position in which one believes that only a certain kind of scientific knowledge is true; as David E. Cooper puts it, ‘the conviction that only natural sciences provide genuine understanding of the world and life’⁶.

⁶ Cooper, 2018, p. 118.

Furthermore, criticism and disapproval of pedagogues and pedagogy (in this case, of me and my work) can be seen as an indirect way to obstruct and silence the revolutionary potential of education. The strategy to exclude citizens from the realm of higher education and critical discourse is still a way of maintaining the status quo of society⁷. Interestingly, in totalitarian societies, academics are silenced by rulers and politicians because of the revolutionary potential of critical discourse; in Sweden, the work of silencing seems to be taken over by the academics themselves. I will come back to this point; first, however, I will take a deeper look at the question of how disappointments play into this situation.

Public disappointment

Let me now briefly return to the hairdresser, and her frustration with teachers. At first, I felt personally confronted by her. I then realized that there was more to her response than a personal attack. She was upset about the younger generation, which does not live up to the expectations of the older generation, and she concluded that the fault must lie with teachers and schools. In retrospect, when I listen more carefully, I also hear annoyance and distress in her voice. She was disappointed because the school did not give children what they needed, and because the children did not turn out as she expected. Her expectation that education would effectively advance the young ones and build a better society in accordance with the plans of the older generation had not been fulfilled. My hairdresser was expressing a concern that is well-known from history: the disappointment of the older generation about the state of the younger generation, and the worry that society will lose its moral foundation.

Public disappointment in education is widespread, and is reflected in politics and in the media. Politicians try to win elections with promises concerning schools and education, although they have few or no ideas about what schooling really ought to provide for each child and citizen. They tend to present argumentations and

⁷ Alm, 2016.

solutions that, from both an academic and a professional point of view, seem populist and superficial; nevertheless, on some levels, the politicians' solutions intersect with professional and academic discussions and interests. The international competition between nations that occurs through Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests⁸ is one arena in which political and academic interests seem to merge – or clash. The media adds to public frustration by publishing articles, interviews and columns with a thin content that basically aims at bashing pedagogues. Attacks on pedagogy do not only come from scientism, but also from both populism and idealism, and from their descriptions of 'what is' and their expectations of 'what is not yet'⁹. Both parties overlook the fact that pedagogy happens in the present. Pedagogues take the tendencies of educational relations in consideration in their research; furthermore, classroom life is in many aspects much more complex, diverse and situated than what the goals of (natural) science seem to accept. The bashing of pedagogy is, though, most severe and problematic within the academic arena because it torments pedagogy and so threatens the scientific and critical reflection on teaching and pedagogical relations.

Forms of frustration

In the professional field of education and in the academic discourse on education, there are at least three different tendencies that signal discontent with the current state of pedagogy; they can be recognised as attitudes, however, they come from rather different points of view.

First there is a positive and hungry attitude, which I have mostly heard from those I call the 'professional frustrates'; these are teachers and teacher educators who reveal interest and expectations, saying: 'We want more!' They want more time to discuss, reflect and develop as teachers; they want more time to

⁸ For information on the PISA tests, see <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/> or <https://www.skolverket.se/>

⁹ Biesta and Säfström, 2011.

work together with the students and community, and to deal with the critical questions of our time. Most teachers who work in schools feel an urge to improve their teaching skills, and to know more about pedagogical relations and about how to strengthen their students as learners and as future citizens. They tend to see pedagogy as a field of knowledge that can enhance their own practice, rather than something that will blindly direct their actions and methods.

Within the academic research community, there is a range of critical positions. A strong voice is heard from the ‘antagonists’, who wish to influence teacher education, teaching methods and the curriculum from their own particular perspectives. At best, they are convinced that they can offer better alternatives to education in terms of teaching methodologies than pedagogy can; at worst, they commit discursive violence and public shaming of educational research and pedagogy, as they ride on the back of populism. Disappointment is too weak a word to describe their position; it is more suitable to speak of anger and resentment – and, in many cases, an urge to use the situation to win points and, ultimately, research money. Their attitude towards pedagogy is a condemning one; they state that pedagogy can deliver nothing of value in comparison with (for example) neuropsychiatry and brain science. Among the antagonists, we find an appeal for scientism – the position I described previously. The antagonists have been successful in their efforts to influence politics, including the distribution of research money¹⁰.

On the other end of the academic spectrum are the ‘discouraged researchers’. They show concern for education at large, but are

¹⁰ The result of this can for instance be seen in the disappearance of Education (sv. *Pedagogik*) as an independent discipline in the categories of sciences decided by the Swedish Research Council, *Vetenskapsrådet*, where only the vague field of Educational Science (sv. *Utbildningsvetenskap*) contains all kinds of research and positions that deal with educational questions, including “pedagogik”, and correspondingly so in the national list of scientific subjects (sv. *nationell ämneskategori*) in the Swedish *DiVA- Academic Archive Online*.

critical of the development of the field and work hard to change it from within. Their concern can be summarized by the following quotation: ‘Education has developed from being considered the key to well-being of nations and individuals into global and result-oriented competition between nations within an economic logic’¹¹. Instrumentality and technicality, together with strong economic interests, are seen as factors that hinder good pedagogy, and alternative perspectives are tested and presented.

Researchers who wish to focus on the potential of education to cultivate intellectual and moral virtues tend to find themselves more or less ruled out from educational discussions. Anders Burman¹² claims that *Bildung* (sv. *bildning*) ought to be one of the most central concepts in education, and complains about the lack of interest in *Bildung* among educational researchers in Sweden. He suggests that the reason might be that education, like so many other disciplines, cut its relations with the German tradition after the Second World War. Another reason could be the fact that the discipline of education in Sweden has advanced in close relation to educational reforms within education at all levels.¹³ Burman¹⁴ further argues that certain areas of educational research, such as the history of educational ideas and the traditions of *Bildung*, have been neglected in favour of the Anglo-American scientific tradition. However, within the Anglo-American tradition, we also find deep interest in questions of human flourishing and moral and ethical issues. Within that tradition, however, these questions are mostly framed in discourses other than that of *Bildung*, including the tradition of liberal education – a point that Burman grasps. He asks for more research about and on *Bildung* and cultivation. However, in order to grasp the issues of teaching, human flourishing and cultivation, also research in pedagogy is needed; that is, it needs ongoing inquiry from within pedagogical relations. Teaching is an elusive practice and a never-ending moral endeavour; the final words about teaching cannot and will never

¹¹ Olsson, Dahlberg and Theorell, 2015, p. 718.

¹² Burman, 2018.

¹³ Forsberg and Sundberg, 2018, p. 7.

¹⁴ Burman, 2018, pp. 9–10.

be said, as Hansen has claimed. Therefore, there must be constantly ongoing and lively inquiry and reflection.

The ground-breaking potential of education

Earlier, I described the questions my hairdresser's aversion to teachers awoke in me. As a teacher, I saw teaching as a dynamic practice supported by reflection and pedagogy. She saw something completely different. She saw wily kids, frustrated parents, a problematic society and so forth. Today, I acknowledge that my hairdresser had good reason to be upset about the status and results of the Swedish school system, at least from the viewpoint of whether school was living up to the promises given by society; she was right to be disappointed, because her expectations were not fulfilled. Like so many others, at some point she had been presented with a glorification of schools and schooling. She was probably unaware of the vast amount of research and text being produced about schools, teaching and education without ever really reaching the field of practice – and even if she was, such research was not her concern. Like the rest of society, she expected wonders from mass education at all levels, from the individual to the national. And when it turns out that schools cannot live up to the expectations, who are the guilty ones? First the teachers, then the structures, then the teacher students, then the researchers...and, among these, the pedagogues!

The irony is that such sturdy critiques are right, in a way, because pedagogues cannot and will not offer a solution to the knowledge competition between nations, just as researchers in economy will not present the final solutions to our economic practices. The pedagogues cannot and will not come up with lessons that are as effective as those in some other countries – unless they totally abandon the idea of education as encouraging freedom and forming future fellow-humans and democratic citizens; and few Swedish teachers see how their work could possibly lend itself to the instrumental and technical effectiveness of schools such as Gymnasium No. 11 in Hangzhou¹⁵. In this modern Chinese

¹⁵ Matikainen, 2018.

school, students are constantly followed and recorded by advanced camera systems that recognize each individual student and record every change in their faces and each bodily movement. The camera can see if students are happy or sad, and registers their behaviour. This system is defended by the local Chinese school authorities for making both teaching and learning more effective; since it is also used to identify students in the library and at the cafeteria, it is considered to be of great help in making things run smoothly. Understandably, this method has been questioned, and some describe it as being far beyond the imagination of George Orwell. However, as the method at this school is a planned part in the development of a personal balance for behaviour points for each citizen, its use is likely to spread. From my perspective, the method in use at Gymnasium No. 11 has nothing to do with pedagogy. Instead it is a misuse of what education and schooling can and should offer. Knowing that certain methods make something more effective does not make those methods right or morally defensible. A totalitarian system may offer effective training, but it contradicts human flourishing and education for freedom. A society with meticulous control cannot afford critical discussions or different perspectives, and has no interest in the divergent questions of education. Such a society does not want the messy and obscure discussions that pedagogy can inform.

Pedagogy is not only about schools and children. It also deals with meaning, forming and educating within society at large, throughout the life-span of the citizens. A life-long process of thinking, forming and learning – of *Bildung*, if you like – keeps human beings awake, interested, critically thinking and deliberating. Teaching, along with all education, must be open to reflection and change, making it both a vital part of democratic society and a challenging object for research. Many pedagogues have argued that education must be understood as atemporal, and as being located within the tension between ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’¹⁶. Here is where different educational relations take form: some speak of a pedagogy of place¹⁷ and others speak of the

¹⁶ E.g., Biesta and Säfström, 2011.

¹⁴ Løvlie, 2007; von Wright, 2011.

encounter as the place where the significant pedagogical relations occur¹⁸.

Education has ground-breaking potential – both to encourage human flourishing and to switch off the light in the eyes of the learner. Therefore, education needs pedagogy and a vital discussion about its normative implications and its foundations.

Concluding words

In the summer of 2018, I walked back to the address where I first had my hair cut in Stockholm. The hairdresser was no longer there, so I did not manage to speak to her about her view on teachers, education and pedagogy today. Neither did I have the opportunity to tell her how her bashing of education had inspired me to deepen my pedagogical questions and to work within the research field for much longer than I had planned. Confrontations, as long as they do not hit too hard, can be healthy and awakening. Twenty-five years ago, my hairdresser challenged my thoughts. This does not mean that she was right; however, it may serve as a reminder that we need to encounter each other, listen carefully, respect our differences and keep the discussion going. Even within scientific discourse, we must accept that nobody will have the final word. Maxine Greene's optimistic outlook on education may therefore serve as an ending to this essay: 'And, when freedom is concerned, it is always a time to begin'¹⁹.

References

- Alm, Erika. "Undervisningens revolutionära potential." Gästblogg i Tidningen Curie. <http://www.tidningencurie.se/gastbloggar/erikaalm/2016/12/06/undervisningens-revolutionara-potential/> [Retrieved August 2018]

¹⁸ Nilsson Sjöberg, 2018b.

¹⁹ Greene, 1988, p.135.

- Biesta, Gert, and Carl Anders Säfström. "Ett manifest för pedagogik." *Utbildning & Demokrati – tidskrift för didaktik och utbildningspolitik*, 20.3 (2011): 83-95.
- Burman, Anders. *Kultiverandet av det mänskliga. Essäer om liberal education, bildning och tänkande*. Göteborg: Daidalos, 2018.
- Cooper, David. *Animals and Misanthropy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Forsberg, Eva and Daniel Sundberg. "Formeringen av det pedagogiska kunskapsområdet – mot ett forskningsprogram." *Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige*, 23.5 (2018): 5-19.
- Greene, Maxine. *The Dialectic of Freedom*. New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1988.
- Hansen, David T. *Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching. Toward a Teacher's Creed*. New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2001.
- Ingvar, Martin, Christer Sturmark, and Åsa Wikforss. "Den postmoderna sanningsrelativismen leder oss ner i en anti-intellektuell avgrund." *Dagens Nyheter* 22 March 2015.
- Løvlie, Lars. "The Pedagogy of Place." *Nordisk Pedagogik*, 27.1 (2007): 32-37.
- Matikainen, Jenny. "Kuka viittaa, kuka nuokkuu? Kiinalaislukiossa kasvoja tunnistavat kamerat valvovat oppilaiden jokaista ilmettä ja asentoa." Yle. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10296993> [Retrieved 7 August 2018]
- Nilsson Sjöberg, Mattias, ed. *Pedagogik som vetenskap. En inbjudan*. Malmö: Gleerups, 2018a.
- Nilsson Sjöberg, Mattias. "Toward a Militant Pedagogy in the Name of Love: On Psychiatrization of Indifference, Neurobehaviorism and the Diagnosis of ADHD – A Philosophical Intervention." *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 37.4 (2018b): 329-346.
- Olsson, Liselott Mariett, Gunilla Dahlberg, and Ebba Theorell. "Displacing Identity – Placing Aesthetics: Early Childhood Literacy in a Globalized World." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 37.5 (2015): 717-738.

Simola, Hannu. *The Finnish Education Mystery. Historical and sociological essays on schooling in Finland*. London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

van Manen, Max. “The Call of Pedagogy as the Call of Contact.” *Phenomenology & Practice*, 6.2 (2012): 8-34.

von Wright, Moira. “Om undran inför mattan: Pedagogisk-filosofiska undersökningar i klassrummet.” *Humaniorastudier i pedagogikk*. Ed. Tone Kvernbekk. Oslo: Abstrakt forlag, 2011. 169-181.

Moira von Wright is Professor of Humanity and Welfare at Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College in Stockholm and a former Professor of Education at Örebro University and Vice-Chancellor of Södertörn University. Her current research concentrates on intersubjectivity, participation, seclusion and resilience; a contemporary approach towards “doing good” in the margins of civil society.

The terms and conditions of use are related to Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC-BY) 