

Maarten Simons

The rediscovery of the irrelevance of educational thinking

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were very often at the center of attention. Educational thinking, however, was not clearly present. It seemed that educational thinking failed to give a voice to schools. As if it were difficult to reflect on what was happening in schools. The debates were dominated by virologists, epidemiologists and biostatisticians, and later assisted by health economists and psychologists. They often talked *about* schools. Everyone was talking about schools. However, this concern for schools was prompted by some urgency, guided by practical questions, and raised in function of continuation: how to keep young people learning, how to avoid learning losses and the exacerbation of achievement gaps, how to provide education from a distance, how to keep motivating young people? These questions were often part of a discourse of national salvation that we now know can tolerate little contradiction: how to prevent the current generation of young people from being a lost generation, or rather, a loss-making generation? During the crisis, educational economists indeed have not neglected to predict the (lasting) economic impacts of school closures on both students and nations. They calculated how much income loss students might expect as a result of two or three months without school. So young people not only had to face the crisis, but immediately had to ask themselves whether their learning loss would lead to permanent damage.

Of course, this economic message was intended for policymakers. It was a reminder of their responsibility to redeem the schools – and that usually came down to keeping schools open as long as possible. Educational economists should have known that young people usually listen when adults speak, especially when dealing with their future. Perhaps they knew, and the message about their mortgaged future was primarily intended for young people. Already before, this economic vocabulary has found its way within the language of policy, as witnessed by the Flemish minister of education who, in the introduction to his policy memorandum (2009-2014), wrote in a triumphant way, seemingly without really offending anyone: “Children are the capital of Flanders. Because of our good and demanding education, that capital could grow and flourish again and again.” But the COVID-19 crisis is throwing a spanner in the works. What threatens is a generation that is loss-making.

The discourse of national salvation is not new. It is a discourse that links the interests of the young generation to those of the nation. To say that the younger generation is the future often means to claim schools as a means to safeguard that future and, where possible, to control it. This can be claimed even if that generation does not yet understand its civic responsibility, or even more, thanks to the fact that the new generations do not yet realize it. After all, the first message that young people get at school is: “without education, no future”, or “you will be lost without a diploma”. This is the kind of discourse that gives chapter and verse on the ongoing educationalization of the world. Educationalization always has to do in one way or another with determining the future, and the instrumentalization of schools with that future goal in mind. Schools turn out to be the place but also the “technology” to

shape young people after a certain image. This is the kind of political theology that the educationalization of society always resorts to. The result is that schooling becomes very often the continuation of politics by other means.

It was therefore no coincidence that, in many countries, closing down schools was the last thing people thought of to help reduce the spread of the coronavirus. The argument is that youthful capital must grow and flourish at school, and what should be avoided is a situation in which parents risk to be kept away from their (tele)work: after all, that would mean a double loss. During the pandemic, an educational and economic reason of state quickly found each other: the economy can continue to run when the younger generation is in school, and it makes sense for the younger generation to be in school if the economy continues to run. In case of school and business closures, the option of distance learning and teleworking was presented as a last resort. At that moment, it was up to families to invent new ways of housekeeping to make the required multi-tasking possible. The grip on and intervention in family life was probably never so far-reaching.

Why was the silence of educational thinking about schools sometimes deafening in all this? Why does the school often find a spokesperson in other scientific disciplines and much less in those who claim to be concerned about it? Perhaps an impetus to answer that question can be found by reversing the perspective: not try to explain the progressive instrumentalization of schools, but try to understand why educational thinking has shown little or no resistance to this educationalization. To this end, it is interesting to make an analogy with democracy. Spokespersons on behalf of democracy were also conspicuously absent during the COVID-19 pandemic. As if there was an embarrassment to speak of democracy in times of crisis and especially when a discourse of national salvation blurs the distinction between experts and politicians. In an analogous way, there may be an embarrassment to dwell on the school when that same discourse has already sealed the school's fate as an instrument of national salvation. As if dwelling on and thinking about democracy and school become irrelevant – maybe important, but bypassing the subject. It is definitely an irrelevance that at least the author of this text has experienced himself. Is this experience also a rediscovery?

The measures following the health crisis have had an interesting side effect: all kinds of rediscoveries. First of all, of course, the rediscovery of what is suddenly no longer possible: the value of on campus education as a result of distance learning, the meaning of working at the office after a long period of working from home, or the value of face-to-face encounters during these times of virtual meetings. Maybe such a wave of rediscovery is not specific to this particular crisis, but characteristic of any crisis. The measures taken in response to the crisis have also enabled another rediscovery; re-seeing and re-appreciating the richness in what has always been there. Rediscovery and re-evaluation go hand in hand here. The rediscovery of the richness of family life through the obligation to stay at home and to work at home, of local nature through the prohibition of all kinds of cultural activities, of the importance of taking care of oneself in caring for others by eliminating normal social manners. With Hannah Arendt (1958/2006, 174) we could say that it is precisely in a crisis situation, and therefore at the moment that something is about to disappear, that something shows itself and, as it were, can be rediscovered.

What may also be rediscovered today is that educational thinking is not a discipline or has no discipline because educational thinking is concerned with what itself has no ground. For this, we join Jacques Rancière, who speaks in a similar way about the political and democracy. Rancière states that democracy is the equal and anarchic condition of the existence of

power that is specifically political, but that it is precisely for that reason also the condition that the exercise of power continually tries to tame or control and repress (Rancière 2017, 8). Democracy thus is the name for a polemical issue and even a scandal for what is at stake is an exercise of power by those who have no entitlement to exercise power – “the power of whoever” (Rancière 2009, 10). Democracy is not grounded in equality, but is always a seizure of power in which equality manifests itself in an act of freedom. No qualification, learned competency or justification is needed for that act. We propose to strike a parallel between “democracy” and “school”: what school means for learning is what democracy means for power. Starting from here, “school” is not a learning institution or organization, but is the equal and erratic condition of the existence of power that is specifically educational (see also Rancière 1988). The notion “school” then refers to a mode of learning that is radical for it starts from freedom and equality: it assumes every-body can become capable of every-thing. This can also be formulated as follows: “school” refers to a mode of learning based on the assumption that there is no predetermined (natural or social) destiny, and “school” offers exactly time and space to find or shape one’s destiny (see also Masschelein/Simons/Larrosa 2019). If this makes sense, then we must recognize that school, like democracy, is the name for a polemic issue. The scholastic form of learning can then easily be used in all kinds of national salvation projects and schools are gladly used in the process of educationalization. The price, of course, is that in determining the destination or the future for young people, the assumptions of freedom and equality are omitted. This is evidenced in the ambition for keeping schools open in times of crisis, but even more clearly in arguments to replace “slow” school education for the coming period with “fast” personalized online learning trajectories in order to speed up learning, reduce the learning losses and save the nation. In this context, even if it is barely talked about, “school” continues to remind of the assumption that everyone comes into the world without predestination (natural, social or religious) and is the name for the slow place and time that we give young people to look for a destination themselves. The COVID-19 crisis – with the plea to keep schools open and limit the loss of a generation – may lead us to rediscover that educational thinking is indebted to the assumptions of freedom and equality. This is the rediscovery of a tricky dependence on groundless assumptions that makes educational thinking possible but at the same time weak. Perhaps that is why educational thinking is always quickly passed by and drowned out by scientific disciplines that must not relate to those assumptions of freedom and equality, that can avoid polemical issues and that can approach schools as mere objects or instruments. If this makes sense, then the corona crisis first and foremost makes us rediscover a tension in the epistemological self-understanding of educational thinking. On the one hand, as soon as educational thinking wants and dares to give a voice to the school, it will always have to bring the hope of freedom and equality to the foreground in one way or another and expose itself to criticism for so-called naive optimism or lack of realism. But on the other hand, this thinking is easily tempted to (allow itself to) be disciplined to become a foot soldier in processes of educationalization where the assumptions about freedom and equality are no longer at issue, but where (also epistemologically) legitimacy is derived from national and other projects of salvation. But what is the value of such a rediscovery? Doesn’t a rediscovery always come too late?

References

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The sickness in our schools: Corona and the logic of Human Capital

An old *New Yorker* cartoon has come to my mind repeatedly over the last nine months as I’ve talked with colleagues, students, and the occasional reporter who has called to ask what the pandemic will mean for American education. The cartoon depicts a Godzilla-like monster rampaging through a city. Smoke billowing in the background, the monster holds a decapitated skyscraper in one claw and the other is about to create a matching pair. On the city street below, it’s mayhem. Cars have been swallowed up by a wave of people fleeing in panic. In the foreground, at the head of the fleeing crowd, an exasperated man in a suit and tie yells out to his colleague, “Just when citywide reading scores were edging up!” Nothing ruins a joke like explaining it, but every detail of the cartoon is perfect: the man ruing the unfortunate timing of the beast’s arrival (as if there was an ideal time to destroy a city); his absurdly qualified lament (“reading scores” not even reading and math!; “edging up” not even “improving!”); and, of course, the inability of the unfolding scene to shake him of his usual fixations. The overall effect is perfectly calibrated satire: What better way to mock America’s ritualized hysteria over minor fluctuations in standardized test scores than to set them against the backdrop of an actually unfolding catastrophe?