

In defense of the world ... and the family?

Preface to the Korean edition

When we published our book on the defense of the school in 2012, we were faced with a major challenge: How does one defend something that in many parts of the world is either taken for granted or criticized as a remainder of an obsolete modernity? It felt as if we were defending something that shouldn't and couldn't be defended: such a defense could hardly appeal to those who take schools for granted, while it would simultaneously be read as a conservative and even reactionary response (and ignored for that very reason) by those who consider schools a relic of the past. Despite this difficult challenge and the lack of viable public for the book, we thought school education should nonetheless be defended; it makes a difference whether societies take the risk to offer school education to the coming generation and allow them to experience themselves as a new generation, or whether societies, on the contrary, avoid that risk and rely on reproductive modes of learning. In retrospect it maybe wasn't so surprising after all that the book attracted much attention in the context of South-America. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that in that context the notion of 'school' is still explicitly related to both colonial experience as well as engaged attempts at social and political changes in a situation of severe social injustice, exploitation and poverty. Similar to democracy, school education is still worth defending in those contexts where the experience of living in a society that does not provide schools (or democracy, for that matter) still resonates. And, thus, school is neither taken for granted nor just something of the past, and not just a service for personal flourishing and individual development, but still strongly connected, albeit in an ambivalent way, to possibilities for emancipation and hence still very much a public issue related to a struggle for the right to school.

In 2020, things have changed. In many parts of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to lock down for a couple of months. Although not that long a time, it was seemingly long enough for many people to start speaking on behalf of the school again—sometimes even defending the school—or at least to start discussing the important societal role of school education. And what critics of school education—that is, those equating school education with an old-fashioned, dull, boring, inefficient, outdated form of learning—never could have imagined to be possible occurred: it was mainly children and students that came to the defense of school education. Naturally, parents and politicians also argued for opening up schools again, but often for utilitarian and foremost straightforward economic reasons: having children at home makes working life for parents difficult if not impossible, in addition to the fear that missing out of school implies an interruption in 'human capital' investments. But children and students seem to express something different in their defense of the school today. It seems as if they are able to point at something more existential about school education, something which cannot simply be replaced by online digital learning environments and social networks. For sure, they also long for schools to open up in order to see their friends again. But there is more to it than that. In a way, they seem to struggle with being reduced to (merely being) sons or daughters, with being locked down in one's own family, and they even seem to struggle to escape from their parents who have started to act as teachers by making it impossible for young people to be (merely) a son and daughter. They are no longer school students, but at the same time they have difficulties being sons or daughters. Defending the school, for them, seems to be about a liberation from the family; and becoming a school student or pupil again in that regard would be an act of emancipation. But there seems to be even more at stake. What the lockdown has invoked is

not only the longing for school education as a liberation from the family, but also, and perhaps less visible, the call to liberate the family from the impositions of school education. What it shows, and what needs further study, is probably that a defense of the school implies at the same time a defense of the family. Today, young people probably experience very clearly, in the (relative) absence of school and family life, what it is to be a school student and what it is to be a son or daughter. Does it make sense to say that they have experienced today—as a truly unique historical condition—what it means to no longer have a family and school life?

If this is indeed the experience that young people articulate today, perhaps there is even more at stake. Could we say that they have experienced what it means to have no ‘world’? Sure, they have experienced what it means to have mainly a ‘social’ life, a life limited to communication and exchange. But this social life, in the words of Hannah Arendt, is a life without world or with only an environment which is life facilitating or life threatening, a friendly or hostile outside. Perhaps being closed off from school education is being closed off from world exposure. And could we maybe state that exactly for that reason what they miss in missing school is the experience of a certain freedom and a certain equality. Not the freedom of choice—and being online at home offers probably a lot of choice—but the freedom of being *able*. And not a juridical or social equality, but the equality of being a pupil or a student like all others, which means the equality of being (at least for some time and to some extent) undefined by family, nature, social background or predefined images of a desired end. And could we state that what they miss in missing family is the experience of a certain privacy—a certain possibility to do things without always being counted or judged publicly, but also, positively, to be on one’s own without the interference of economic, social or scholastic logics—and the experience of a certain shadow for exclusive intimacy. And could we maybe add that what they miss in missing school is also an experience of the ‘real’ or common/shared ‘world’—so that a defense of the school implies not only the defense of the family but also of a shared world. Children and students seem to express not only that the school allows for a liberation of the family (including a liberation from their brothers and sisters) but, if we can say so, also for a certain liberation of what we would like to call ‘the terror of the social’. In that sense, the issue is not social emancipation through school education, but school as the time and place for emancipation from the social. Hence, young people seem to express that the school not only allows one to see and make friends, to be with peers, but also allows for a certain liberation from their friends and peers, and from being locked down into the social sphere or the sphere of communication (either with or without social media), and the sphere of the concern for recognition (likes, views, recognition of identity or performance), of the concern for personal emotional states that in the end can never be ‘really’ shared. Maybe children and students experience that what school does is to offer access to worlds, giving them the opportunity in class, through work and play, to discover and dwell in worlds.

If this is true, perhaps this book is outdated, in the sense that young people today articulate much more clearly and precisely than we tried to do in *tempore non suspecto* why it is worth defending school education. Or maybe our book can now gain a new meaning and can start a new life when translated in the articulations of these new experiences. And this is maybe similar to how this translation into Korean can give the book a new start. For it allows moving towards new land and at least to assume that the book is able to say something to the inhabitants of this and other new lands, something that crosses their experiences. We hope that the book will find itself in good company through a common experience also shared by children and young people. If so, it will be harder to disqualify what we tried to articulate as being either purely utopian and idealistic, or an uncritical

return to a traditional school, which itself has been but a chimera that never existed. The school is *not* the family and scholastic learning *cannot* be equated with learning at home and online. Of course, schools have always been the target of a certain taming and many schools are largely de-schooled nowadays, as we also tried to indicate in our book. Yet it seems that young people have been able to sense and notice particular experiences of freedom, equality and a shared world, experiences that the word school itself names and that are at stake in schools. Despite attempts to tame and de-school the school, young people and students seem to long for these experiences after all.

We want to express our deep gratitude to Dr. Yun SunInn to have made this translation possible in the first place. We also greatly appreciate the care and very thoughtful attention with which she has taken up this work. And we thank her to have invited us to write a short preface. It has helped us to reconsider what we wrote in the Dutch version in light of what happened to the whole world in early 2020.

Jan Masschelein & Maarten Simons

Leuven, 18 June 2020