

## «Like Air Bricks on Earth»: Notes on Developing a Research Agenda Regarding the Post-War Legacy of New Education

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**Abstract:** This article presents the building blocks of a new research agenda through which the author aims to fill a gap in the existing scholarship on the history of new education in Belgium and its international links. In particular, the War years and the decades immediately following the Second World War remain un(der)explored. Since the author has only just begun to tackle this research agenda, the article presents preliminary thoughts, questions, and a critical reflection on issues related to developing such an agenda. It does this in a programmed way. The article is built on a review of the research that the author has already undertaken on the history of new education, on Ovide Decroly in particular, in search of the elements he considers equally important for a study of the post-War period. The article is organised into two main sections, focusing on the dimensions of space and time, respectively. The article distinguishes the Epoch of new education from the recuperation of the new education legacy through appropriation processes in the post-War period; it discusses the need for a transnational dimension and calls for international collaboration; moreover, it introduces the notion of contemporariness as a concept for critical assessment of the post-War legacy of new education.

**Keywords:** Ovide Decroly; New Education Fellowship; new education; appropriation; transnationalism; contemporariness

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### 1. Introduction

Together with Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon, who were the supervisors of my doctoral dissertation (Van Gorp, 2005b), I am studying the life and work of the Belgian educational reformer Ovide Decroly (1871-1932) for about twenty years now. In this period, we mainly concentrated on the first half of the twentieth century, the heyday of the new education, and only sporadically extended our gaze to the

post-war period (see, for instance, Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2003; Herman et al., 2011a-b; Van Gorp, 2011; Van Gorp, Simon & Depaepe, 2008, 2011). For the following years, however, as far as research on new education is concerned we aim at establishing a research agenda along two lines. The first is not that new at all, as it still concerns the life of Decroly himself. Emphatically framed as a biographical approach, it is as it were a complementary study to my dissertation, which started from a history-of-science approach and discussed Decroly-the-scientist based on his scientific works. New education was only one construction in the scaffolding or assemblage of Decroly's scientific oeuvre alongside medicine, medico-pedagogy, pedagogy and psychology (Van Gorp, 2005a; Van Gorp, Depaepe & Simon, 2004; Van Gorp et al., 2006; Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2015). In contrast to my dissertation, the biographical project will be based primarily on archival sources. This allows us to revisit previous research and perhaps at some points also to make adjustments to premature or rapidly drawn conclusions, where gaps in primary and secondary sources sometimes forced us to speculation, over-interpretation, and the formulation of hypotheses (for a discussion on our biographical project, see Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2018; Van Gorp, Simon & Depaepe, 2015).

With the second research line, the building blocks of which I would like to present here, we mainly aim at filling a gap in the existing scholarship on the history of new education in Belgium and its international connections. In his doctoral dissertation, also under supervision of Frank Simon and Marc Depaepe, Tom De Coster has studied extensively the post-war legacy of new education or the progressive pedagogical heritage as they called it in Flanders since the 1960s until the turn of the millennium (De Coster, 2008; De Coster, Depaepe & Simon, 2004; 2009). However, particularly the war years and the immediate decades following the Second World War remain un(der)explored. As I will argue, the period from the 1940s until the 1960s is interesting in many respects and deserves our attention, as does the entire post-war period. Nevertheless, as historians of education we have to remain vigilant when dealing with historical time. The closer the temporal distance, the more we are fishing the same sea as for instance the sociologists of education do. On the other hand, it also challenges us to think about the break between past and present or, to put it the other way around, to reflect on connecting past, present and future (Bevernage & Lorenz, 2013).

Since we are only on the doorstep of this research agenda, and most of the research has yet to be done, this article presents preliminary thoughts, questions, and a critical reflection on issues related to developing such an agenda. The article is built on a review of the research we already conducted regarding the history of new education, in search of the elements we consider equally important for a study of the post-war period. The article is organised in two main sections, focussing on the dimensions of space and time respectively. The space I concentrate on is Belgium, more specifically Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. However, it is impossible to do so without using a transnational perspective (Fuchs, 2012; 2014). The time I concentrate on is obviously the post-war period. In this article, I particularly pay attention to the first two decades after the Second World War. The section, however, also introduces the notion of contemporariness as a concept to assess critically the post-war legacy of new education. The article is based on notes

I took during the preparatory stage. As these notes discuss a broad range of topics and sources, or issues we were confronted with while exploring the potential of this research agenda, I deliberately opted to use these notes to structure the article in a rather «programmatory» way. Using short paragraphs or subsections, the article presents step-by-step the program of the research agenda I would like to implement the coming years. By doing so, this article explicitly launches a call to join hands, as it presents a much larger and ambitious research agenda of a transnational scope.

## 2. The dimension of space

### 2.1. Space: Belgium

In his doctoral dissertation on the history of the New Educational Fellowship (NEF) between 1945 and 1966, Christopher Clews (2009, p. iv) explored the NEF's «importance as a disseminator of educational and political ideals after 1945 and its contribution to debates about the post-war reconstruction of education and society». Clews's dissertation taps into an important research agenda but also shows some limitations. Although he discusses general trends in the development of the NEF as well as developments in both the USA and Europe, emphasis lies on the English branch of the NEF. However, Clews studied also the NEF's international network in the period from 1945 until 1966. According to Clews, immediately after 1945 the NEF in Europe «most successfully recreated its network in Belgium, France and Holland» (Clews, 2009, p. 26). He examined more particularly the branches or sections in Belgium, Denmark, France and Germany, as they were «the most prominent and vigorous» and reveal «the diverse range of local conditions and problems faced by the NEF in non-English speaking regions» (Clews, 2009, p. 189).

In Belgium, more specifically, Clews pointed at the difficulties of uniting the two branches, the French-speaking and the Flemish section, the membership of which remained strictly separated. The success of the French-speaking section in Belgium was due to the efforts of its president Henri Biscompte, who was inspector of special education and lecturer at the Free University of Brussels. One explanation for its success was, according to Clews, that Biscompte ensured that all major publications, diaries and announcements of activities were translated into French (see, for instance, Biscompte, s.d., which was a translation of the NEF Diary published in 1952). Other key reasons for its success were the wide variety of activities and the publication of its own journals (Clews, 2009, pp. 212-217). The key issue, however, can be found in an arbitrary comment on language: «[James] Annand, the NEF secretary corresponded entirely in English, often receiving responses in poor English, from the Flemish section, or in very good English, from Henri Biscompte» (Clews, 2009, pp. 212-213). Indeed, language played a crucial role in the NEF's loose organisation, the circulation and readership of its journals as well as in the multilingual character of the conferences (Van Gorp, Simon & Depaepe, 2017). However, equally important, and perhaps even more important for us historians of education, is the way language has an impact on what we do, and do not do.

## 2.2. Space: On languages

The clue is that Clews did not read sources other than English. He mainly concentrated on «the very good English» in Biscompte's correspondence and the connection between the French-speaking section and the Decrolyan legacy. Hence, the key question is how to measure success. It is all relative and a matter of nuancing. When in 1937 a Decrolyan triumphantly stated that «[t]he principles of Dr. Decroly are taught in all educational institutions [in Belgium]» and «their penetration into public education was officially sanctioned in 1936», Decrolyans have been too optimistic about a breakthrough of the Decroly method in Belgian education (Van Gorp, Simon & Depaepe, 2010, p. 345)<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the 1936 internationally applauded Decroly-inspired curriculum for primary education not only was a landmark in the history of Belgian education, it also demonstrated once again Decroly's status as pioneer and figurehead of the new education in Belgium and beyond (Depaepe, De Vroede & Simon, 1991). Such statements, however, ignore the relativity of Decroly's influence on the curriculum, particularly when it comes down to how the curriculum has been implemented at schools. It also ignores that until the present day the Decroly method remains a rather marginal phenomenon in the Belgian educational system (Van Gorp et al., 2008).

More important, however, is the question of what happened in Flanders. To me it occurs to be a matter of both exclusivity and selective reading. The circle of Decrolyans most closely connected to Decroly's legacy and the school he founded – his heirs so to speak – was a Francophone, bourgeois and mainly Brussels affair. This group remained radically attached to an orthodox or dogmatic use of the Decroly method (Van Gorp, 2006), and dominated the Belgian French-speaking section of the NEF. Both ideology and radicalism contributed to the, all in all, limited reception of the Decroly method in Flanders. Nevertheless, Flemish Decrolyans did exist. Moreover, one of them, Jozef Emiel Verheyen (1889-1962) was a prominent member of the Belgian section, since its establishment in 1930. As Decroly's former student at the Free University of Brussels, he directed an experimental school in Zaventem near Brussels between 1923 and 1928. In 1924, in succession of the Flemish pioneer of new education Edward Peeters (1873-1937) he became editor-in-chief of the *Schoolblad voor Vlaanderen*, the journal of the *Vlaamsche Opvoedkundige Vereeniging* of which he was the spokesman. In 1927, he founded the periodical *Moderne School*, which was the successor of the *Schoolblad voor Vlaanderen* (Depaepe, 1999; Depaepe, Dams & Simon, 1999; Depaepe & Van Gorp, 2003; Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2006). A closer look at Verheyen's biography, particularly the time he was at the State University of Ghent, reveals an active Flemish group, also having their own journals. They spoke a different language but also shared a language with the French-speaking group, which was the language of new education using the rhetoric of a child-centred approach.

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<sup>1</sup> *Centre d'Études decrolyennes* (s.d.). Brussels (Uccle), Belgium. Écoles nouvelles de Belgique: Cahier Histoire de l'école. Unclassified archive.

### 2.3. *Space: Flanders*

At the State University of Ghent, Verheyen developed a laboratory for experimental pedagogy in combination with an experimental school, which he considered as the continuation of the Zaventem School. Particularly the Ghent experimental school offered future teachers opportunities to practice with educational reform theories, Decroly being one of the main influences. Perhaps here, in their less dogmatic say more eclectic or experimental approach, we find the element that distinguished the Flemish section the most from their French-speaking companions. Nevertheless, Decroly was never far away. In Ghent, from the 1930s to the 1950s, Frederick de Moor experimented with Decroly's educational principles at one urban primary school, named after Decroly, and even wrote a handbook on the Decroly method based on his Ghent experiences (de Moor, 1930). As a schoolchild, William De Coster (1920-2001) visited de Moor's school. Later he wrote his doctoral dissertation with Verheyen as supervisor, and ultimately he became professor of psychology at the Ghent university. De Coster worked closely with another Verheyen disciple, Maria Wens (1919-1988), who would later become professor of orthopedagogics (Broekaert et al., 2015). Before that, in the immediate years after the war, they would become key figures in the Flemish section, actively campaigning for the good cause.

Yet, in the aftermath of the war, not a single branch of the NEF could be called successful. The NEF went through a crisis, in finances as well as in membership and in pursuing its educational goals, a process that was already instigated in the 1930s (Clews, 2009; Brehony, 2004; Koslowski, 2013). This also applied to the Belgian section, as a conference demonstrated that was organised in Lier, Flanders, in December 1948. At this meeting, which De Coster and Wens chaired, Flemish Decrolyans met with Dutch Montessorians in order to provide a forum for contemplation on how the educational principles of their respective sources of inspiration, Decroly and Montessori, had been implemented in a variety of practices. It concerned a discussion on the «general spirit» and pedagogy, the foundations of both methods as well as the question whether a synthesis between both was possible or appropriate (De Coster & Wens, 1949a, p. 260). The discussions reveal tensions in accordance with what we discussed elsewhere regarding the interwar period (Van Gorp et al., 2017). However, something crucial had changed. The crisis forced both Decrolyans and Montessorians to consider at least cooperation, which eventually could lead to a kind of merger. Moreover, the conference showed that Decrolyans and Montessorians crossed borders. It was neither a Belgian nor a Flemish event; it was a joint event of Dutch-speaking supporters of new education. This international or, perhaps better, transnational dimension is of utmost importance.

### 2.4. *Space: The Low Countries... and beyond*

One of the central guests at the Lier conference was the Dutch educational reformer Kees Boeke (1884-1966), who had required renown as founder in 1926 of the school *De Werkplaats* (The Workplace children's community) in Bilthoven near Utrecht (Hooghiemstra, 2013; Kuipers, 1992). Together with Amélie Hamaïde (1888-1970), who was in many respects Decroly's (contested) successor (Van Gorp et al.

2008; 2010), Boeke was member of the NEF's executive board. In 1935, he had founded the *Werkgemeenschap voor Vernieuwing van Opvoeding en Onderwijs*, which was acknowledged as the Dutch section of the NEF the year after. In his aim to establish connections between the Dutch branch and other NEF-groups, Boeke showed a strong international ambition. At the Lier conference, it was particularly Boeke who insisted on a closer collaboration between Decrolyans and Montessorians (De Coster & Wens, 1949b, pp. 304-305). That Boeke's unifying approach found fertile ground in this collaboration between Decrolyans and Montessorians appears from the journal *Vernieuwing van Opvoeding en Onderwijs*, of which he was the editor since its foundation in 1938. Before the war, both the Dutch moderate Montessorian Cornelia Philippi-Siewertsz van Reesema (1880-1963), who inclined towards Decrolyanism (Van Gorp et al., 2017; Hazenoot, 2010), and the Flemish school inspector Leo Roels (1882-1969), who was one of the 'spiritual fathers' of the aforementioned 1936 curriculum for primary education (Depaepe et al., 1991), joined the editorial board. After the war, both De Coster and Wens among others would represent the Flemish input to the journal's editorial board.

The journal also demonstrates that the unifying, collaborative spirit Boeke had advocated for extended by far the network of Decrolyans and Montessorians. At least temporarily, the journal was the official organ of the *Werkgemeenschap voor Vernieuwing van Opvoeding en Onderwijs* (the Dutch section of the NEF); the *Vereniging voor vernieuwing van Opvoeding en Onderwijs* (the Flemish section of the NEF) represented by Wens among others; the Dutch Montessori Association; the Dutch Dalton Society; the Flemish Freinet-inspired *Volksopvoeding (Vlaanderen)*; the *Vereniging Kinderverzorging en Opvoeding*; the Dutch *Werkgemeenschap voor Individuele Psychologie*; and the Foundation *Instituut ter Bevordering van kunstbegrip bij Jongeren*. In the decades after the war, the participants in the network continuously played a push-and-pull game on a continuum between eclecticism and orthodoxy. The question remains, however, whether, how and to what extent it really came to more than a (superficial and forced?) collaboration that existed on paper. How long did the commitment last of those involved in this network? Another question that deserves scrutiny is the extent to which this journal through the international ties of its partners, particularly the Montessori Association and the Dalton Society, also forged international collaboration that went beyond the Flemish-Dutch axis within the NEF. In any case, the journal existed until the early 1970s, when after a dispute on its identity and goals the «pluriform» journal was transformed into a more radical, socialist-inspired journal (see, for instance, Boot & Zonneveld, 1973). By that time, however, the Flemish section of the NEF had been dissolved. This brings us to the dimension of time.

### 3. The dimension of time

#### 3.1. *Time: On appropriation*

In previous research on Decroly, Montessori and their respective adherents, we have discussed the tension between moderate or eclectic and orthodox or dogmatic groups in the interwar period (Van Gorp, 2006; Van Gorp et al., 2017). In an article

on Montessori education in the United States, Keith Whitescarver and Jacqueline Cossentino (2008, p. 2571) present a «historical treatment of the [Montessori] method and the movement by treating Montessori as a case study of enduring and ambitious educational reform». In the article, they distinguish between what they call a «European» and an «American» view. While the latter, liberal view «called for rapid and widespread diffusion and an inclusive approach toward other educational approaches», the European vision held that «the value of the Montessori method lay in its radical vision of the child, a vision that could only be preserved if the integrity of the method was carefully guarded» (Whitescarver et al., 2008, p. 2580). The first vision is what we termed eclecticism, the second dogmatism. However, our research shows that such a division does not make sense. The «ideology of pluralism» (Whitescarver et al., 2008, p. 2587) did not belong exclusively to American Montessorianism. It is, therefore, important to take also change and diversity into account. Concepts as well as approaches are diffuse and meanings attached to it may shift over time, as they also do through appropriation processes in relation to space and context (Depaepe, 2012).

A telling example can be found, for instance, in Semel & Sadovnik (1999, p. 355), when they mention that American Dalton schools as elite college preparatory schools «have managed to survive and prosper by adapting to the educational market» although they «have lost touch with much of their progressive heritages». Marketization, in this case in relation to gentrification and urban renewal processes, also played a significant role around the turn of the millennium in Ghent, Flanders, in the transformation process of an ordinary public city school into a progressive Jena Plan school (Goossens & Van Gorp, 2016; Goossens et al., 2018). These schools are, of course, no exception. Ghent, however, mainly accelerated in Freinet education, to such an extent even that Ghent proclaimed itself «Freinet city» in 2010 (Departement Onderwijs en Opvoeding–Stad Gent & Freinetbeweging, 2011; see also Goossens et al., 2016). In the post-1968 context, Freinet schools gradually became the number one alternative to mainstream schooling in Flanders, next to new education models which already existed before the war (Jena Plan, Dalton, Montessori, Waldorf) and new Flemish models of progressive schooling like the so-called «Life Schools» and «Experience-oriented Schools» (De Coster et al., 2009). In the neo-liberal context of the 1980s and particularly the 1990s, the emancipatory goals – which in the Netherlands also lead to the aforementioned dispute on the journal *Vernieuwing van Opvoeding en Onderwijs* – made gradually way to a more market-oriented approach (De Coster et al., 2009; Goossens et al., 2016). Against this background, the question remains as to what extent progressive heritages have been taken into account as well. As Semel et al. (1999, p. 356) lamented, «it is a depressing fact of life (...) that most (...) school reformers suffer from historical amnesia and tend to be future oriented» with the result that «they spend an inordinate amount of time reinventing the wheel».

### 3.2. *Time: On periodization*

Due to developments such as those described in the previous paragraph, historians tend to recognize, or should we say produce, caesurae in the post-war

(or contemporary) history of new education (Bevernage et al., 2013). This tendency is not free from problems, as we will discuss in the next paragraph. Nevertheless, it offers helpful tools to master historical time and to deal with breaks and continuities. In his doctoral dissertation on the NEF, Clews (2009) distinguished between three periods: a period of revival in the immediate years after the Second World War (1945-1950), a period of consolidation (1951-1963) and finally a short period of decline until the NEF's decision in 1966 to transform into a 'World' Education Fellowship (see also Koslowski, 2013). The three periods actually were the last three from five main stages Clews detected in the NEF's history, the first two of which were a period of growth in the 1920s followed by a crisis in the 1930s (Clews, 2009). In the NEF's self-description as recorded in the 1952 diary, the first stage was one of founding and expansion, the second stage one of recognition and setback, the third stage one of survival and resurgence (Clews, 2009, p. 220; see also Biscompte, s.d.). However, if we would follow this periodization we would again be tempted to overrate the NEF's elasticity. Moreover, national histories and idiosyncracies force us to look at heterogeneity and to deal with a variety of possible periodizations. Germany is a telling example in that regard, not only because of the NEF's response to fascism but also because of the troubled history of *Reformpädagogik* during National Socialism in Germany itself (Idel & Ullrich, 2017).

German research on the history of *Reformpädagogik* offers some useful insights on periodization. Idel & Ullrich (2017) distinguish between four different theoretical approaches to the history of *Reformpädagogik*. The first, deconstructing approach, with Jürgen Oelkers (1989) as main representative, starts from a demythologizing account that distinguishes between rhetoric and praxis and focusses on continuities between the «old» and the «new» presented as a better alternative to the old. In our own research so far, we usually positioned ourselves on this strand. In contrast to the first approach, the second approach is a canonizing one, focussing on the influence new education had and still has on educational innovation. In some respects this strand, represented by Theodor Schulze (2011) and Hermann Röhrs (1986) among others, contributed to the mythologization of new education. This approach is also prominent in French research on the history of the *éducation nouvelle* (see, for instance, Hameline, 2002; Wagnon, 2013). Although this strand seems to lack some critical mass, it is significant that the periodization Röhrs proposed regarding the history of *Reformpädagogik* points to the 1960s as an important turning point of reactivation and renaissance after which bottom-up initiatives often gave an impetus to a reform from below. In the current movement of *Freie Alternativschulen*, combining new education models (for instance, Montessori and Freinet) and newer pedagogical techniques, Röhrs saw a new stage in the history of *Reformpädagogik* (Röhrs, 1986; see also Lischewski, 2018). The third, reconstructing approach, represented by Wolfgang Keim (2016 a-b) among others, also emphasises the 1960s as a stage in which progressive heritages have been recuperated. It ultimately resulted in a revival. However, Keim emphasises the importance of distinguishing between the closed Epoch of *Reformpädagogik* (in Germany until 1933) and its post-war legacy. He also stresses the success of alternative education in Germany and beyond, which since its revival in the 1960s gradually exceeds the success new education had during the NEF-period. In line with Keim's distinction between Epoch and recuperation, the



fourth approach, represented by Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (2011), distinguishes between three forms of existence of *Reformpädagogik*: (1) the historic *Reformpädagogik* (the 'classics' of the pre-war period); (2) the reception and appropriation of the pre-war classics in post-war reform-pedagogical practices; and (3) the reform-pedagogical Code which acts as an inspiring reservoir of fundamental ideas in current practices of *Reformschulen*.

Indeed, for various reasons, the 1960s have been a turning point in the history of new education. The end of the NEF coincided, for instance, with the empirical turn in social sciences and the rise of emancipatory, critical and institutional pedagogies (De Coster et al., 2004; 2009; Koller, 2004). However, following the distinction between Epoch, on the one hand, and recuperation and further development, on the other, from an international perspective one might argue that the Epoch of new education ended in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, the period in which most of the new-education protagonists and the first generation of disciples had passed away<sup>2</sup>. An important question is as to what happened to the new-education legacy after closing the Epoch. In our opinion, Keim's distinction is indeed important, but we would like to warn against such a rigid handling of breaks in historical time. After all, the question is as to what extent dogmatism and orthodoxy permeated the recuperation of the new-education legacy since the 1960s, or, to put it differently, how and with what purpose school reformers since the 1960s use labels, for instance the nametag of Freinet or Montessori. Moreover, also the recent, liberal alternative school models run the risk of dogmatism. A label might reveal something, but it does not say everything. In appropriation processes also another mechanism, which we described in an article on the influence of Dewey in Belgium (De Coster et al., 2005; 2008; see also Van Gorp, 2005b), played a determining role. In the reception and implementation of his educational thought in Belgium, Dewey was reduced to an «indigenous foreigner»; the tag with the name Dewey on it was removed and replaced by other, such like Decroly's. It also seems to have happened to Decroly in the Netherlands, despite van Liefland's efforts there to promote the Decroly method (van Liefland, 1950). In the Netherlands, Decrolyanism might have spread mainly indirectly or *in disguise*, by promoting the Belgian 1936 curriculum for primary education. A consequence of it was that the innovative elements of the curriculum were identified with Roels, one of the «spiritual fathers», rather than with its «auctor intellectualis» Decroly (van Overbeeke, 1938, p. 35). Obviously, both the moderate Montessorians, who in their eclectic approach mixed the Montessori material with elements from, for instance, the Decroly method, and the radical Montessorians, who had a strong foothold in the Netherlands (where also the Association Montessori Internationale is based), enforced the process and prevented that Decroly's educational principles would carry his nametag. This brings me to the notion of contemporariness.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance: Montessori (1952), Dewey (1952), Petersen (1952), Ferrière (1960), Rotten (1964), Boeke (1966), Freinet (1966), Washburne (1968), Geheeb (1970), Neill (1973), Parkhurst (1973), Ensor (1974), and in Belgium: Verheyen (1962), and Hamaïde (1970).

### 3.3. Time: On contemporariness<sup>3</sup>

In a book chapter on the concept of educationalization (Depaepe et al., 2009, p. 20), we argued that «concretization in specific historical situations still remains necessary» in order to «do justice to the multi-coloured pallet of cultural contexts in which the institution «school» has become a school». I could rephrase it and argue that this concretization is necessary in order to do justice to the multi-coloured pallet of progressive and alternative schools. We made this statement, which is in a way self-evident, in our quest for a «historical school theory», which was the starting point for the doctoral research project Frederik Herman conducted under supervision of Marc Depaepe and myself (see, for instance, Herman et al., 2007; 2008; 2011a-b-c). In an attempt to find and define time-resistant dimensions of the institute *school* – related to the question as to what makes a school into a school – we distinguished between the concepts of non-contemporariness and contemporariness<sup>4</sup>. Non-contemporariness, it was argued, «assumes the contemporariness of historical situations; both are like text and context, inevitably related to each other» (Depaepe et al., 2009, p. 20). While in that research we were more interested in the concept of non-contemporariness, here I would like to stress the importance of *contemporariness* of school reform. It focusses less on the *what*, the grammar of schooling, and more on the *why*. And it connects with a question De Coster et al. (2009, p. 671) raised at the end of their article on alternative education in Flanders: «Would it (...) not be worthwhile also to make [the motives of parents] (and the reflections of alumni) a subject of research? At the very least, this would facilitate the formation of a more realistic image of the relationship between theory and practice».

Researching contemporariness is studying motives. It connects with the question as to what makes a school into a *contemporary* school. Contemporariness in that regard stresses the importance of vision. Without vision, Elliot Eisner (2002, p. 577) argued, «we don't have a compass, no way of knowing which way we are headed», and he added: «Ironically, what seldom gets addressed in our efforts to reform schools is the vision of education that serves as the ideal for both the practice of schooling and its outcomes». That is exactly what contemporariness is about; it is about explaining why one does what one does the way one does it (compare with questions central to the curriculum field according to Kliebard, 1989). A school, whether alternative or not, is only contemporary, call it up-to-date or modern, when built on vision. This is context-related and, thus, subject to change. The crux in this is that contemporariness is a flexible concept, which often clashes with a dogmatic approach. Interestingly enough some pioneers of new education, like Decroly and Freinet, defended themselves an «education in evolution», against any form of fixation (Van Gorp, 2006, p. 43). History learned, however, that their epigones, particularly after their death, changed their ideas into a static system. On the one

<sup>3</sup> The author likes to thank Martin Valcke at Ghent University, who helped him to develop the notion of contemporariness in joint seminars on contemporary educational systems.

<sup>4</sup> To be distinguished from the Marxist notion of non-contemporaneity (see, for instance, Morfino & Thomas, 2017), which nevertheless opens an interesting discussion on historical time. See also Bevernage & Lorenz (2013) on Preston King's notions of «present» and correlating notions of «past» (pp. 48-49).

hand, it raises questions about the contemporariness of new education models today. On the other hand, it shows that in many respects it is perhaps a more fascinating venture to study the epigones instead of the pioneers, and the post-war, or post-NEF, recuperation of new education rather than the Epoch of new education itself. Moreover, returning to my previous comments on labels, the new education models require special attention, particularly when backed-up by movements, as is the case with, for instance, Montessorianism and Freinetism. In that regard, it was significant, that De Coster and Wens at the 1948 conference in Lier referred to a «Decrolyan» school (with no connection to a Decroly movement whatsoever) in contrast to the «Montessori» school (De Coster et al, 1949a, p. 260).

Researching contemporariness is rising historical consciousness. It is striking how often in new-education language reference is made to «spirit». At the 1948 conference in Lier, for instance, there was not only the abovementioned reference to a «general spirit», but also to «the spirit of the Master» (De Coster et al., 1949a, with which they referred to Decroly) and the «Montessori-spirit» (Plancke, 1949, p. 262). In their concluding reflexion on the conference, De Coster et al. (1949b, p. 303) also observed that Decroly and Montessori had a great significance, «already because of the spirit that prevailed in their schools». In my opinion, however, in the recuperation of new education vision is often confused with this notion of *spirit*. Does one want to implement «the vision of the Master» or act according to «the spirit implemented by the Master»? In the recovery of pedagogical heritages, one cannot simply implement the past vision; one has to develop a vision in accordance with the contemporary context. However, does one want to use a particular label, for instance that of Freinet or Montessori, one has to develop a vision not only in accordance with the contemporary context but also in line with the driving «spirit». A difficult task, indeed, since one easily runs the risk of becoming an anachronism due to a myopic dogmatism. To put it with the words of a normal-school teacher who attended the 1948 conference, it would be «like [dropping] air bricks on earth» (Piette, 1949, p. 289). It is not so much a problem of historical amnesia, but of historical consciousness instead.

#### 4. Conclusion

In line with the programmatic character of the article, this section is shaped as a «Fazit», a format that is offering a conclusion and outlook presented as a summary of short numbered program items which function as the compass on which I will navigate through the history of the new-education legacy in the post-war period.

1. *The Decrolyan legacy*: Following up on our previous research on Ovide Decroly, I would like to know what happened to the Decrolyan legacy in the post-war period, in Belgium, Flanders and beyond. I am interested in the adherents who were responsible for his legacy, the *Decrolyans*, both as a collective and as individuals. I would like to know who they were and which role they played. Who was involved? How were they organised? Which groups of Decrolyans existed? Which positions in society did they have, which professions and ideologies? I also want to know how strong their commitment was to the Decrolyan cause. How long did it last? A long-term perspective will be a prerequisite.

2. *The appropriation of Decrolyanism:* I am interested in Decrolyanism. What is it? How did it develop, in Belgium, Flanders and beyond? There is the small circle of Decrolyans at the Decroly School in Uccle (Brussels), and a federation of schools (FELSI) with which the school is connected in a small network, but what about others in Belgium and elsewhere? To what extent it remained theory and rhetoric and to what extent it became materialized into educational practices? Are there any traces to Decrolyanism outside schools, in non-formal spheres? Where do we find Decroly schools? Are there any national or regional models to distinguish? Is Decrolyanism an urban or a rural phenomenon? What is a Decroly school actually? Which types of Decroly schools do exist? Which methods and programs are applied? Do we find rather dogmatic or mostly eclectic approaches? Decroly and other Decrolyans had a connection with the Free University of Brussels. Scientific legitimation has contributed a lot to Decroly's aura, as was the case with other pioneers of new education. However, this «scientific» approach was continually tested by the Decrolyans' militancy (compare Haenggeli-Jenni, 2017; Hofstetter & Schneuwly, 2006). How did this evolve after Decroly's death?

Following Tenorth's forms of existence (2011), thus far we mainly focussed on the first form of existence, Decroly and the first circle or generation of Decrolyans. In appropriation processes, we will have to focus on both explicit references to Decroly (second form of existence) and implicit references to Decroly (third form of existence). May we assume that the second form of existence is more often associated with dogmatism and the third form of existence with eclecticism, or is that a bit of a leap? We will need to have a closer look at case-studies, at individuals supporting Decrolyanism and at individual schools identifying themselves as Decroly school or applying (elements of) the Decroly method. We will have to see whether and to what extent any periodization is required. Ovide Decroly died rather early, in 1932, which means that we could consider the entire post-war period as 'period of recovery'. On the other hand, it was not until the 1970s that Decroly's last close collaborators had passed away. Where did the Decrolyan Epoch end? What about later generations of Decrolyans, when the temporal distance to the source of inspiration became bigger? Did the closing of an Epoch imply the end of possible rapprochements and cooperation, did it stimulate competition or rather the opposite?

3. *The transnational dimension of Decrolyanism:* In the aforementioned, an international dimension is already present. I assume that outside the Brussels Decroly School and its network, Decrolyanism quickly evaporated in Belgium after closing the Epoch, if not before. As our study on the influence of Dewey in Belgium learned us, it is complicated if not impossible to study Decrolyanism beyond the label or nametag of Decroly. Moreover, we have to acknowledge that in the post-war period other new education models paved their way in Flanders, not the least the Freinet model. Obviously, I am also interested in studying these models. However, as I take the Decrolyan legacy as my starting point, those other models will be examined first in relation to Decrolyanism. In a follow-up study on our article on Decroly and Montessori in the interwar period (Van Gorp et al., 2017), we will start from the meeting between Decrolyans and Montessorians shortly after the war in order to investigate the transnational network between Flemish Decrolyans and Dutch Montessorians. Perhaps we should say *progressives* instead of Decrolyans

since we are not dealing here with die-hard supporters of Decroly's educational ideas. Even the word progressive might be problematic. In any case, we would like to know Kees Boeke's role in this rapprochement. We would like to learn more about the Flemish contribution. How strong was the network? How was it organised? Who was involved? What role did the journals play? What about the other groups and movements participating in the network? What happened to the Flemish NEF section? What did the members do after the section faded away? By extension, I would gradually like to investigate other international connections, within the NEF and beyond, during and after the NEF-period. From my position as a Germany-based scholar it is needless to say, that I would like to broaden the scope to links with German *Reformpädagogik* (see also Blichmann, 2014). The French, Spanish as well as Latin-American connections also deserve special attention (see, for instance, Van Gorp, 2019; Arce, Simon & Depaepe, 2015, 2016; Wagnon, 2013; Pozo Andrés, 2007; Monés, 2006). As stated in the introduction, international cooperation will be a prerequisite in order to do so, not only because of the scope but also because of languages and access to sources. Archival records are scattered and fragmented, and there remains a lot of work to do.

4. *The contemporariness of Decrolyanism, Freinetism, Montessorianism...*: As I am interested in the contemporariness of contemporary new education models, I would like to know more about motives, about vision. Why are people attracted to Decrolyanism, Freinetism, Montessorianism...? Why do people adhere to the label Decroly, Freinet, Montessori...? What do they know about Decroly, Freinet, Montessori...? What does it mean to act according to «the spirit» of Decroly, Freinet, Montessori...? When does one *deserve* a particular label and when not? What is the role of movements in this, for instance of the Montessori or the Freinet movement? What does it mean to be pure or orthodox? What does it mean to be moderate, experimental or eclectic? And how does one balance it with the notion of contemporariness? Indeed, the historian of education has a task, if not a duty, in connecting past, present and future (Aldrich, 2003). In doing so, the historian studying the contemporary history of new education could profit from oral-history methodology. The challenge, however, is to tackle the lure of presentism and to respect temporal distance, since the closer proximity «stresses the entanglement of “then” and “now”» (Attwood, 2007, cited in Bevernage et al., 2013, p. 39).

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