

Why Even Today Educational Historiography is not an Unnecessary Luxury. Focusing on four Themes from Forty-four Years of Research

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Abstract: I will successively discuss: (1) continuity and change in education; (2) the demythologisation of the idols and ideals of New Education (in German Reformpädagogik); (3) the discourse of the colonial educational initiative and (4) the sublime relevance of the irrelevant. Each of these four specifically chosen themes is consistent with one of the research lines to which I have adhered during my career, i.e. (1) the history of education (including Belgian education) in the strict sense (and with a focus on the internal organisation of primary education, the subject of my licentiate thesis, submitted in 1977); (2) the history of educational sciences (the subject of my second, special PhD, completed in 1989); (3) colonial and post-colonial educational history in the former Belgian Congo (the theme of one of our first books, published in 1995) and lastly (4) the theory, methodology and history of educational historiography (the subject of my first PhD, which I defended in 1982).

Keywords: educational historiography; history of primary education; feminization; social history of teachers; conceptual tools.

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1. Introduction

With a view to anchoring our field further at the University in Leuven and the Kortrijk Campus, which I had the honour of running for four years, I have chosen the statement formulated in the above title as the subject of my farewell lecture¹. Ultimately, this is not a new theme by any means, because it is related to the issue

¹ November, 9th, 2018, KU Leuven, Kortrijk, Campus Kulak. This article is an elaborated version of this lecture and of a paper that was presented as a keynote lecture at the Conference «History of Education as a Scientific Pedagogical Discipline and a Teaching Subject – Past, Present and Perspectives», held at the University of Montenegro, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Pedagogy, in Nikšić, on 25th and 26th June, 2019.

of the relevance of the history of education assigned to me as the subject of a PhD by the late Professor Maurits De Vroede in 1977. After all, even then our discipline, the history of education, invariably referred to in Dutch using the term *historische pedagogiek* (literally: «historical pedagogy»), was under pressure. Apparently, Professor De Vroede, being a pure-bred historian (Depaepe & D’hoker, 1987), did not have an easy time continuing to convince his colleagues at the faculty of psychology and educational sciences of the need for a historical approach with regard to those educational sciences. After closer examination – I expanded the initial question, which in my view was too limited, to include a more historiographical overview of the theoretical and methodological debates within the historical «sub-discipline» of education from an international perspective – it appeared that the criticism of the unhelpful character of history with regard to more future-oriented fields, such as the educational sciences, has been more of a constant than a temporary issue. The criticism was undeniably related to the emergence of «efficiency thinking» in the «modern» social sciences, related to the preference for empirical, evidence-based knowledge, experimentally verified if possible.

Since the dominance of empirical-analytical thinking subsequently persisted (and intensified, partly due to the decline in normative, ideologically-influenced educational sciences, see, among others, Masschelein et al., 2019) I deliberately added «even today» to the title. Furthermore, the fact that I consciously replaced «history of education» with «educational historiography»² in my research is precisely due to the methodological developments I studied, which I will briefly address at the end of this essay. However, I have avoided opening with them. Not only because enough has already been written about the nature and identity of the history of education in the past (recently, e.g. Moreno Martinez, 2018), but also and above all because the proof of the pudding is still in the eating... Therefore, let us start with a number of cases from my forty-four years of research – four cases to be exact – taking into account the theoretical-methodological positioning about which I would just like to say a few words in conclusion.

I will successively discuss: (1) continuity and change in education; (2) the demythologisation of the idols and ideals of New Education (in German *Reformpädagogik*); (3) the discourse of the colonial educational initiative and (4) the sublime relevance of the irrelevant. Each of these four specifically chosen themes is consistent with one of the research lines to which I adhered during my career, i.e. (1) the history of education (including Belgian education) in the strict sense (and with a focus on the internal organisation of primary education, the subject of my licentiate thesis, submitted in 1977); (2) the history of educational sciences (the subject of my second, special PhD, completed in 1989); (3) colonial and post-colonial educational history in the former Belgian Congo (the theme of one of our first books, published in 1995) and lastly (4) the theory, methodology and history of educational historiography (the subject of my first PhD defended in 1982, as mentioned above)³.

² M. De Vroede (1979) did also use the term, but this was really exceptional and in German. For him the field was «history», and thus «history of education».

³ In this essay I have included as few literature references as possible, in order to limit the number of footnotes. More information about our work can be found in the detailed bibliography on

2. Theme 1: On continuity and change in education

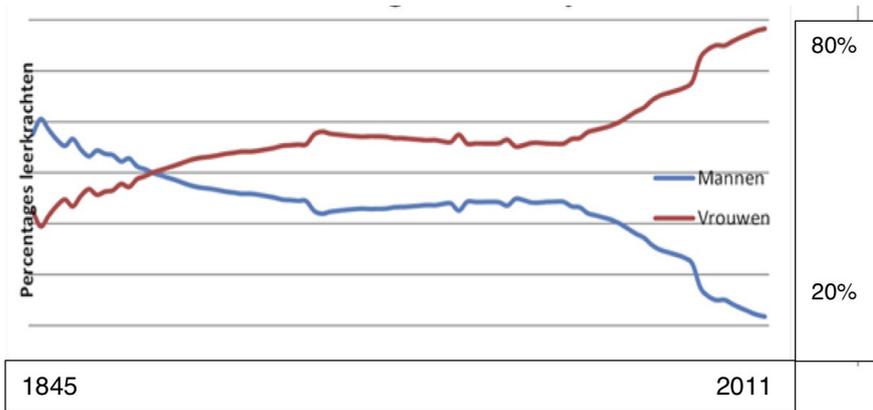
On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the teachers' trade union, the COV (which stands for Christelijk Onderwijzersverbond) we⁴ were asked whether the social position of primary school teachers had improved in the past century. From the trade union's point of view this naturally constitutes a legitimate, understandable and simple question, but one that is by no means easy to answer. This is because social status or position is obviously a complex given, in which highly diverse variables play a part. While one factor may result in greater appreciation, another could cause teachers' prestige to decrease. Let us take, for example, the quality of flows entering teacher training programmes – a subject of frequent complaints today. In contrast to the rather stereotypical image of the teachers' college from the interwar period as the «university» for intelligent children of the ordinary people, except in a few very exceptional cases the teaching profession no longer seems to attract the bright minds it once did. Therefore, in our study (see, in this respect, Depaepe, De Vroede & Simon, 1993; and also Depaepe & Simon, 1997) besides the level of education, we attempted to include many other operational aspects of the phenomenon, such as employment and career prospects, legal status and employment conditions, social characteristics and the composition of the profession, income and living standards, and – naturally, given the origin of the question – trade union protection. Moreover these factors and their specific historical development do not reveal much on their own, since they would de facto need to be compared with analogous historical developments in other professions and at the end of the day, as far as Belgium is concerned, not much research was or is available.

One of the cases we explored in more detail in an international context (Depaepe, Lauwers & Simon, 2006) concerns the degree of feminisation in the body of teaching staff. Despite the (relative?) emancipation of women, their predominance in diverse care professions is hard to ignore. The fact that these professions in the «soft» sectors are generally less well paid than those in the «hard» sectors, which traditionally attract more men, is also acknowledged. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that the old stereotypical gender role distribution between men and women has continued to play a role on the labour market. Men seemingly still mirror the so-called «breadwinner model» while women continue to be associated with care and the education of children. In any case – and we possess the relevant figures – men are increasingly less involved in the education of primary school children. In Belgium, the number of female teachers first exceeded the number of male teachers at the end of the 19th century. If we compare the respective proportions of male versus female primary school teachers in percentages, we obtain the following graph (Illustration 1):

our personal website.

⁴ Since, as will be discussed later, a lot of the research I engaged in was conducted as part of a team, I prefer to use the plural in those cases.

Illustration 1. development of male (blue line) and female teachers (red line) in Belgian primary education, between 1845-2011



The extent to which this progressive feminisation provides an indication of the profession's social status is another matter. Nevertheless, the fact is that this trend will clearly not end, since flows entering the various teacher training programmes (and by extension studies in psychology and educational sciences) are highly feminised.

One of the most crucial aspects in the context of job satisfaction is undoubtedly control of the profession. As far as primary school teachers are concerned, this factor does not seem to have increased over the years, perhaps also because the study programme, in contrast to many other intellectual professions, has not yet acquired a university or academic status. In the actual teaching practice, teachers must deal with extremely articulate parents (and grandparents) who often believe they know better than the teaching staff. This contrasts sharply with the situation of say sixty years ago, when parental authority regarding order and discipline was usually in line with that of teachers. Partly due to refined, but also far more complex diagnostics, it is now more common for school problems to be the subject of discussions within the family circle, posing a challenge, if not a constant threat, to the competences of newly-qualified male and female teachers. In addition, the intellectual level of the flow of students entering teacher training programmes has not increased. On the contrary: teacher trainers and others involved now bemoan the basic knowledge of the current generation of teachers-to-be (even though for historical researchers of education this type of complaint appears to be a continuity rather than a discontinuity).

Therefore, all in all, continuity and change already seem to adopt a relatively paradoxical relationship in the history of education. Where feminisation of the teaching profession has continued fairly consistently as a result of tough social perceptions, its appeal has decreased. *Mutatis mutandis* this also applies to attempts at renewal in primary education itself. After all, it looks as though the pursuit of more child-oriented approaches in the classroom – the *nec plus ultra* of any progressive educational legacy (De Coster, Depaepe & Simon, 2009) – has led throughout the 20th century to the appropriation of a «modern» (rather than «new») school, which in terms of its internal organisation and school life or schooling, looked even more

school-like than before. Not only did the year group system curriculum take shape that century (Depaepe, 1983), the disciplinary method applied to the children also became increasingly sophisticated and, whether or not consciously, was based on a more psychological approach. This can be deduced from, among other things, our analyses of the educational methods (treatment of the curriculum and course materials) as well as from pedagogical methods (such as punishments and rewards) in the classroom (Depaepe et al., 2000; Herman, Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2007). A close comparison of three periods, which appeared very different in terms of the «context»: the foundations of the liberal Belgian nation state in the 1880s; the economically depressed and simultaneously fascistic 1930s; and the «golden» meritocratic 1960s, leads us to conclude that the «text» of school life and/or schooling has not fundamentally changed in all these years. The experienced expert patterns of an intuitively constructed school culture apparently served to immunise the *vom Kinde aus* of the German «reform pedagogy» (the educational reform of the Reformpädagogik) and the «new school movement» elsewhere. Whereby one could also question whether ultimately this often unexplained school teacher wisdom, which was poorly substantiated in scientific terms, was not equally in the best interests of the child, by protecting that child from any kind of educational adventure. Examples that spring to mind include certain anti-authoritarian educational methods of the 1970s. It is clear that in Flanders, after the Second World War a compromise of sorts had developed between the *führen* and the *wachsenlassen*, in which there was no way for the latter to compromise the former (Depaepe & Laevers, 1992). Order and discipline continued to be vital and the teacher had to maintain leadership and authority, but had to appeal to the pupils' hearts in order to obtain their cooperation. Not even emotional blackmail was ruled out in this endeavour.

A prime example of the immunisation and consequently also the «ironisation» of educational renewal, is provided by the case of the Belgian curriculum of 1936, which was praised in the international press due to its progressive educational character (Depaepe, De Vroede & Simon, 1991). However, all this was not particularly straightforward. Implementing the great principles of the New Education ideas – pupils' capacity, a child-oriented approach and specifically cross-curricular knowledge acquisition in «centres of interest» (designated by adults) (after the idea of the then already deceased Ovide Decroly, more on him later) – boiled down to an entire series of admissions related to the traditional educational character of the school. Not much remained of the «environmental study», a term the Catholics also despised because it left hardly any room for the transcendent character of religion, intended to address the themes of these «centres of interest», apart from a separate school subject, on the margins of the curriculum, something that we have been able to establish in our primary school education.

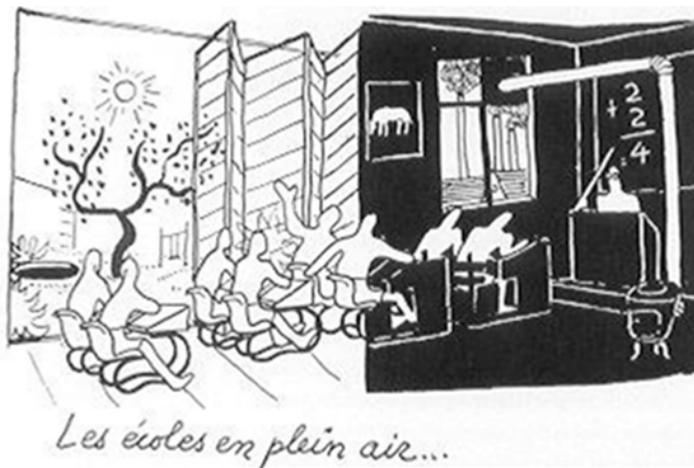
Many other examples can be provided, more technical as well as process-based, of failed or not particularly successful educational innovations, whether or not accompanied by reverse effects. To cite just two here (discussed in more detail in our work): the introduction of a folding, flexible school desk, designed by Oscar Brodsky, and the preference for so-called open air schools, whether or not orchestrated from above. As far as the former is concerned, the undertaking as a whole ran out of steam. We believe that the design by Brodsky, who hoped that pupils could use his individual

desk to learn anywhere, indoors as well as outdoors, was far too revolutionary for the school and much too «academic» for society beyond it (Depaepe, Simon, Herman & Van Gorp, 2012). It was difficult for the man in the street to envisage education that ventured outside the lines of the classical order. Collective desks organised in rows facing the front where the teacher taught lessons at the blackboard was the concept that was deeply engraved in the collective memory. Moreover, the same applied to outdoor schools. On the rare occasion when the latter was achieved (see Illustration 2), we obtained a classroom with no confining, external walls. That's the whole extent of it, something that prompted an equally rare cartoonist to portray the idea that the innovation of the open air schools consisted of bringing (hot?) «air» inside the classroom (see Illustration 3; Depaepe & Simon, 2003; see also Thyssen & Depaepe, 2010)

Illustration 2. An open air school at the Belgian coast, presumably in the 1920s



Illustration 3. French cartoon on the open air schools (published in Müller & Schneider, 1998, p. 50). The cartoon was made in the late 1940s by Marcel Lods.



How should we interpret this as a whole? Along with Frank Ankersmitt I am of the opinion that the educational life is, no more than the political, not in and of itself ironic or tragicomic, but that it could become so, thanks to historical insight (Depaepe, 2008). A second important insight, which brings me neatly to the next chapter, is the conviction that the idea, the theory, or the scientific research, as is so often wrongly assumed, does not precede the practice, but usually has a converse relationship: it is evoked a posteriori, to legitimise what actually happens in practice. Where is the theory or scientific research prior to the year class system? Who or what says that primary school (as well as secondary school) has to consist of six years? Does it originate from Comenius or empirical (rooted in experience) schoolteacher wisdom? Idem with regard to the duration of a lesson, et cetera, et cetera. Rather than actually applying the results of scientific research or theoretical reflection, it mainly seems to concern the appropriation of certain aspects of a potentially appealing ideology (among other things as a result of the implementation by interest groups), which means that the relationship of the practice with the theory and vice versa is ultimately rather more circular than linear.

3. Theme 2: The demythologisation of the idols and ideals of the New Education

Take the above-mentioned influence of Ovide Decroly on the 1936 curriculum. Apart from the fact that «influence» in history is an extremely difficult category to trace (Depaepe, 2007a), in Decroly's case one cannot ignore the interference of his immediate environment. During his life, as well as following his death, in 1932, his wife and employees (also mostly women), endeavoured to pass on Decroly's «legacy» as effectively as possible. To this end, in their «master's» work the «Decrolyens» not only sought substantive cohesion and coherent applications in education, but primarily strived to afford their work a touch of authenticity and greatness. They placed Decroly on a pedestal in the gallery of the great that had contributed to the progress of humanity (Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2003). This almost irrepressible enthusiasm and polished respect for the «leader» was undoubtedly partly due to the charm, charisma and empathy with which he engaged with his people. While, in addition, the self-interest of employees and/or followers was never really far off. As they allowed the star of the master to shine, it naturally shone on them too, and thus improved their chance of increasing their prestige and social relevance.

As agents of dissemination and, even more, of the appropriation of the master's ideology, these figures of the second row are of particular interest to historical research. As we were able to determine, among other things, from the study of the influence of John Dewey in Flanders (De Coster, Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2005), there was a widespread focus on what these experts had written about their idols in educational textbooks and encyclopaedias. Often, there proved to be few opportunities to consult the genuine work of the great thinkers. Even university libraries did not always include their writings in their collections. And when it came to examining the subject matter – both Decroly and Dewey, the latter a not-insignificant source of inspiration for the former – were invariably part of any educational curriculum (teacher training, as well as entrance exams for inspectors, basically the only real

promotion available in the flat career of the teaching corps – these brief overviews were obviously much easier to study than the authors' original works. What's more, Decroly had never actually written a synthesising book, but usually, whether or not with his initial employees, published in highly specialist scientific journals, as a result of which he was at the time, as it were, a prototype for contemporary researchers (Depaepe & Simon, 2018a).

We will attempt to further ascertain the extent to which the distortions and bias of, for example, the Decrolyens with regard to their star - the ultimate icon of educational renewal in Belgium (to whom two postal stamps were dedicated, see Illustrations 4 & 5) took on legendary and mythological proportions, in the coming period, together with Frank Simon and Angelo Van Gorp through biographical research (Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2018b). After all, the fact is that existing biographies about Decroly are still imbued with a certain innovation idealism: the belief in a better future resulting from an education better adapted to the child; the old adage of a «new» school (i.e. a «new» education) in a «new» society (see, e.g., Wagon, 2018), in which *Wahrheit und Dichtung* are still at risk of becoming intermingled. How far could one go with this renewal, in educational as well as societal terms? To Decroly this was extremely relative (see, e.g., Depaepe, 1990), in the sense that renewal was virtually always conceived as «adapting» to the existing bourgeois, late-capitalist society of the «vertigo» years prior to the First World War (after Blom, 2008). As a biomedical scientist he was not directly involved in developing social innovations, and the pedagogical-didactic innovations that are generally attributed to his work did not appear at the forefront of his publications. A more detailed biography could demonstrate that his scientific expertise was predominantly of a clinical nature (Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2011), and that the actual implications for education were often left to the above-mentioned employees. Ultimately this even applies to Decroly's psychological testing, in which, for example, someone like Raymond Buyse, a highly promising inspector who set out to the US with him in 1922 (Depaepe & D'hulst, 2011; Depaepe, D'hulst & Simon, 2013), played an important statistical role. For the sake of presumably ideological differences – Buyse was Catholic – the latter never totally belonged to the core of the Brussels Decrolyens. Better biographical research is also urgently needed in this regard: which networks did Decroly actually frequent, and how did he engage with them beyond the obvious sphere of Brussels liberalism and paedology (Van Gorp, Depaepe & Simon, 2004)? Who were his sponsors? And how did he deploy his employees? Which part did they play in the scientific work, as well as beyond it? And to what extent were traditional gender patterns decisive in this respect? In which it is naturally not our intention to pursue cheap success with sensational discoveries or allegations, but to place matters in a more accurate context. As we already explained at the beginning of our Decroly study, this can only increase respect for Decroly the «man» (Depaepe & Simon, 1999). In the end, the history of education constitutes much more than the internal reconstruction of leading paradigms, let alone a triumphalist tale of progress of «the longer, the more (is achieved)», and «the longer, the better». By demanding attention for external scientific factors, such as the social, as well as individual processes of academisation, professionalisation and careerism, we have tried to show that the development of the educational sciences also involved man's

handiwork, the driving forces of which do not only, or not in the first instance, need to be sought in the idealism for a better world (see also Depaepe, 1993a).

Illustration 4. Belgian postage stamp featuring the image of Ovide Decroly (1)



Illustration 5. Belgian postage stamp featuring the image of Ovide Decroly (2)



4. Theme 3: Doomed to failure? Discourse on the colonial and post-colonial educational initiative in the Belgian Congo and the DR Congo

The educational initiative in the former Belgian Congo was in any case man's handiwork, to which we made diverse contributions as of the mid-1990s. The most recent synthesis dates from 2017 (Depaepe, 2017). As a result, the demythologisation of the common discourse is also appropriate here. After all, the (principally missionary)

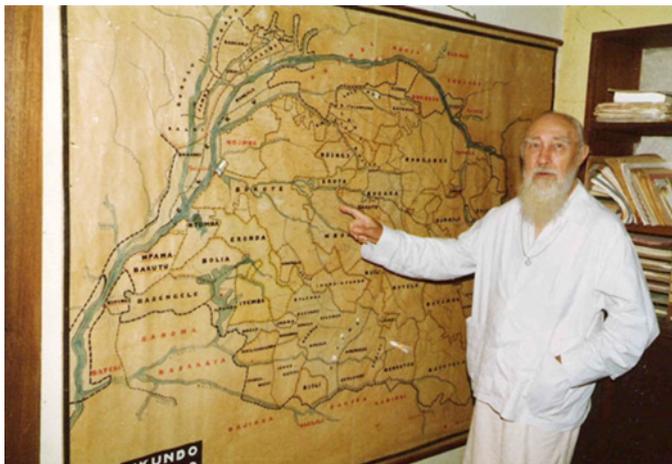
educational initiative was not only viewed as part of the evangelisation of Central Africa, but at the same time formed the final humanitarian element in economic exploitation, and thus justified the presence of whites on the Dark Continent. They brought «light» to the darkness of an indigenous culture labelled as heathen and, in accordance with the triumphalist success story that was also recounted in the mother country, had finally liberated the Congolese from slavery under the yoke of the Arabs... This metaphor of «light-bringers» was presented to the indigenous population almost literally. Not only the «White Fathers» formed an important mission congregation from the beginning of missionary evangelisation, other Catholic missionaries, both female and male, also adopted the white habit (see Illustration 6). This vestimentary code denoted the implicit hierarchy in the intercultural relationship. The Western, let's say Eurocentric, culture was considered to be superior, and demonstrated the path to progress in a virtually exclusive manner. With regard to «development» – a category that coincided with «modernisation» according to the Western idea of progress – the prevailing opinion was that Africa was clearly lagging behind.

However, this did not yet mean the shortcoming had to be remedied in the shortest possible term through education. On the contrary. During the heyday of colonisation, the intention was in any case never to assimilate the Congolese into equals. What the Belgians envisaged was an adapted introduction to elementary cultural skills (reading, writing and arithmetic), in which – as had been the case for a long time in the mother country itself – moralising took precedence over the acquisition of knowledge. Therefore, during the interwar period, the educational offensive focused almost exclusively on basic primary education. It wasn't until 1948 that the focus fully shifted to the bifurcation between education for the masses and the selection of a possible elite – and even then not an intellectual elite, but more an artisanal elite. What people above all needed under the colonial regime were helpers, with the emphasis on helping, which means on their cooperation for achieving the «gradual» development of the *évolué*. Since for the time being all the key posts still remained in Belgian hands. At most the Congolese had to be «slowly» but surely prepared for independence. And the best way to do this was to keep him at a «not so distant distance», or if you like, a «distant proximity». From a colonial perspective, education still implied «caring for»; taking decisions for those who were still not yet expected to do so themselves.

Perhaps all of this came to the fore most clearly in the context of the so-called pedagogical «indigenism», of which, among others, Father Gustaaf Hulstaert (Illustration 6) was a great proponent (Vinck, Simon & Depaepe, 2016). According to Hulstaert, the educational initiative in the colony could only be justified if the colonised people could be elevated from their culture to a higher spiritual (in this case religious) level. Europeanising utilitarianism and instrumentalism (among other things by studying French) was not at all necessary to achieve this. The native had to be able to function independently in his/her own culture. At first glance, this *Pädagogik vom Schwarzen aus*, as we called it, revealed an analogy with the educational modernism *vom Kinde aus* (Depaepe, Vinck & Simon, 2019). However, the question remains to what extent this pursuit of emancipation was able to gain the upper hand with regard to supervision. Indigenists, perhaps even more so than ordinary missionaries, were inherently paternalistic. Affected by ultramontane, authoritarian and even fascistic

ideas, they believed it was the duty of the Congolese to continue the local, traditional culture. The motto of the Flemish poet *wees Vlaming die God Vlaming schiep* (Be a Fleming, that God hath created a Fleming), according to Hulstaert, could reasonably also be applied to the Mongo, the African people whose language and culture he studied. Nevertheless, as a result, dialogue with the «metropolitan» culture of the coloniser (and to a limited extent of the évolués who were sneered at by indigenism) was ruled out in advance.

Illustration 6. Gustaaf Hulstaert, missionary of the H. Hart priests, proponent of indigenism



It is obvious that this kind of patronising educational behaviour was doomed to fail in the long term. The mental space the educational system allotted to the development of the native population was of meagre significance, both quantitatively and qualitatively speaking, despite the successes in the dissemination of primary education. If this was the case for colonial education in general, it was even more explicitly the case when it came to the education of girls (Depaepe & Lembagusala, 2018). Not only were there fewer initiatives undertaken for girls than for boys, but in addition, they were limited to the curriculum of a parallel learning path, that in conforming to the metropolitan perspectives on gender prevalent at the time, restricted access solely to specific care-oriented professions, such as nun, schoolteacher, *monitrice* (i.e. teaching assistant), nurse/nursing assistant and midwife/midwife's assistant. The emphasis on the assisting role of these helpers once again betrayed the colonial mindset. In some ways the girls were twice the victim of the limitations imposed on them: as a person of colour and as a woman.

The question very much remains to what extent the post-colonial era changed this. To this day, girls dropping out of secondary education continues to be a major problem, the origin of which is partly found in the historical mentality regarding women – an issue that we want to continue to study in association with our PhD students in the future⁵. Moreover, the alternatives to an «African» inspired education did not

⁵ E.g. the project of Denise ANGOTAKO, *Etude historique du décrochage et de la réinsertion*

prove to be particularly successful either. This was certainly the case with regard to the Mulele-inspired education, not only for boys but also for girls, that was provided in camps and set up in the early 1960s (Lembagusala & Depaepe, 2018). They preached the revolution in a communist-Maoist sense, but once Mobutu was firmly in the saddle, had to give way to his dictatorship. However, this attempt at greater authenticity in education ultimately came to an end (Depaepe, 1998). Implicitly and explicitly - the use of French springs to mind as an overarching, national language - Zairisation could never escape the grip of a Western neo-colonialism. It is obvious that this created diverse forms of cultural hybridity, especially for the elite (Depaepe & Hulstaert, 2013).

Clearly, we will not resolve the major problems of the present with a historical study of education in the Congo. Nonetheless, this does not stop them, also with regard to the colonial and neo-colonial perspective, resulting in a better «understanding» of the historical situation (see the old dichotomy between the *Verstehen* and the *Erklären*). The accelerated embedding of an education system based on a Eurocentric approach was also seriously underfunded because its cost had to be modest, and was a lot like «cooking under pressure». Consequently, the fundamental characteristics and system errors of imperialist educational thinking and actions became more apparent. Education in the colony, even more so than in the mother country, was an ode to «paternalism». Out of fear of disturbing the educational order and authority, a brake was put on developing the autonomy of the indigenous people. How far we may, can and should go with education, was the key question that dominated the colonial educational issue for a long time...

5. Theme 4: The history of education: the sublime relevance of the irrelevant?

For the time being I will not offer an opinion on whether such statements could ultimately sate the appetite of pedagogues for «lessons» from the history of education. However, the fact is this appetite goes hand in hand with what we consider to be an outdated view of the discipline. This is precisely why, over the years, we have replaced the old-fashioned, Dutch term «historische pedagogiek» (historical pedagogy, i.e. history of education) with «pedagogische historiografie» (educational historiography) (see, e.g., Depaepe, 2004).

Even though this history of education, as the term may lead one to believe, did not always signify the construction of an educational system or theory based on history, it can be said that the approach to the educational past during the emergence of the discipline in the second half of the 19th century, was primarily «educational» and, according to our view and terminology, also «educationalizing». In the university teacher training course that started in Leuven, with François Collard, in circa 1890, the subject *histoire de la pédagogie*, as a journey through the legacy of great thinkers and actors, formed the core of the curriculum. Following in the footsteps of, among others, Gabriel Compayré in France who, being a republican, wanted to emphasise through history the capital role of the (primary) school in nation

scolaire des filles en République Démocratique du Congo de 1960 à 2010.

formation, pedagogues *avant la lettre* were consulted to boost the professional ethos of future teachers.

Jan Amos Komenský, or Comenius, who became a national hero of the Czech Republic (as can be seen from his image on every 200 Czech koruna banknote, see Illustration 7) and the museum dedicated to whom in Prague I had the pleasure of visiting last year, is undoubtedly one of the idols of the educational sciences who crops up in almost every textbook. His *Didactica Magna*, on which he worked from 1633 to 1638, also bears the subtitle: *Allgemeingültige Kunst, alle alles zu lehren*, [... and I will skip a couple of sentences for the sake of simplicity...] *was für Zeit und Ewigkeit von Wert ist* – a message that must still be music to the ears of traditional teacher trainers.

Illustration 7. 200 Czech koruna banknote featuring the image of Comenius.



Despite the greatest sympathy for this peace-loving and extremely tolerant figure – a Moravian bishop who died in exile in Naarden, near Amsterdam, the quest for «what is of value for time and eternity», is difficult to use as a contemporary advertisement for educational historiography. Without going into it in too much detail, there was *grosso modo* a paradigm shift in historical writing about education, from a conceptual historical approach to an analysis, more grounded in reality, of the educational practice of the past and the complex way in which educational ideas, theories, mentalities, as well as results of scientific research were employed therein. During the 1960s and 1970s, which, incidentally, were characterised by the increasing institutionalisation of the discipline through the creation of national and international associations and publications, this shift initially amounted to a rapprochement with social history, while in the subsequent phase, particularly between 1980 and 1990, the link with cultural history was paramount.

It goes without saying that these are far-reaching generalisations that desecrate the richly coloured palette of specific research in which I have had the opportunity to be involved as co-publisher of leading journals in this field. Not only because in the humanities such paradigm shifts are far less radical than in the natural sciences, but also because they mask a deeper problem about the relationship between theory and history. The socio-historical approach of Marxism (with which, for example, I became acquainted via the study of educational historiography in the former GDR, see Depaepe, 1982) naturally differs fundamentally from that of the empiricists. And

with regard to the cultural-historical input, of which we are great fans in our research group, in contrast to many other cultural-historically oriented researchers, we have always wanted to keep our distance from potential applications and/or the *grand theory* à la Foucault (Depaepe & Simon, 2018).

But let's not overcomplicate matters. Therefore, in general a shift took place from a rather educationalising, and de facto also often didactic, approach – for example, consider the very selective manner in which, during the interwar period, Flanders traditionally sought to construct a Catholic *pedagogia perennis* – to a more «historizing» approach to the educational past. This was even more so in the case of the study of educational history than in its teaching. Nevertheless, the subject of the history of education in virtually all teaching courses, national and international alike, had a tough time. The subject, if indeed not already abolished, was gradually moved from the core of the curriculum to the periphery. After all, what «lessons» can ultimately still be drawn from the educational past using such a historising approach for future teachers and pedagogues, let alone psychologists?

In my view this question goes to the heart of the methodological problem that has faced our discipline for many years, especially the extremely utilitarian use of history at times, which could encourage misuse of the past. Even though the discipline is still the subject of much debate, our position on the matter is fairly simple. When history is hitched to one extrinsic goal or another, political, ideological, as well as theoretical and/or programmatic (such as the systems of a Freinet or a Steiner, which to this day are invoked to justify certain, sometimes far removed, educational practices), then it ceases to be history. This is because the specific and complex historical reality to which ideas (also educational ideas) owe their origin and development is simply disregarded in such a general «presentist» perspective. It is in this sense I understand the witticism of Lucien Febvre: «If History teaches any lesson at all, it is that there are no historical lessons» (which, in the end, is relatively syllogistic, because that too, of course, a lesson; see, in this respect, Depaepe, 2010). Historical texts and materials – and this applies a fortiori to used quotations and slogans - must always be read and interpreted in their context. And what remains of non-contemporary, universal (i.e. applicable always and everywhere) educational wisdom, is of such a general and high level of abstraction (human rights, or charity for example) that it must always be translated back to reality, albeit preferably without the adjective historical.

However, this historical-educational interpretation and ditto contextualisation, as the attentive reader will rightly notice, is always provided in the present, and is thus inevitably «presentist» to a certain extent, and in any case «contemporary». That's right! Therefore, we must continue to question our research results with the necessary criticism, and be prepared to review and/or adjust their substance if required, over time. To quote Foucault, who was without a doubt, a genius scholar who frequently provided the direction for, not only philosophy, but also historical writing, writing history is a «discourse» about «discourses» (the latter in plural) (see Depaepe, 2007b). And it is precisely in unmasking the backgrounds usually outside science (in this case social) that have led to a particular interpretation of the past, which provides the key to critical thinking and self-reflection.

As I have tried to set out in the above paragraphs, over the course of the past four decades, together with our diverse research groups, we have strived to make such a demythologising approach, which aims to expose the underlying patterns of standards, values and structures and thus break through any form of self-interest, ideological and/or programmatic advantage, our trademark. It is obvious that such a self-critical approach is difficult without any disarming self-mockery and post-modern irony. Indeed for an intellectual there is little else to do than respond in that manner, prompted by the way in which educational museums are treated (Depaepe & Simon, 2016). Especially in times when commemoration and remembrance, primarily used to convey politico-ideological messages and/or pursue economic advantages, threaten to suppress scientific research in history, demythologisation is far from unnecessary. Apart from the above-mentioned contextualisation, qualification and relativisation of one's own claims, demythologisation undeniably leads to a certain modesty and humility, as my other Leuven teacher in the history of education, Canon Nauwelaerts (1953-1954), wrote in the year I was born. In the end, our attempts to understand history, especially in the field of education, constitute little more than foolishly fighting with shadows on the (Shakespearian) stage of the quick passing of time (Depaepe 1983b). Or as I have read so often in the former railway station café in Ghent (which in the meantime has also disappeared), during a stopover between Kortrijk and Leuven (or vice versa): *irreparabile fugit tempus...*

The lessons I have gradually learned from history are not necessarily based on the substantive, but more on the methodological level. First and foremost, I do not think that the history of education can be summarised in a single, flat developmental line. In our work as well as our courses, I have always strived to be mindful of multiple developmental lines (with their specific pace and own dynamics) and of the way in which they interact. Above, we provided the example of educational theory, practice and mentality. Secondly, the critical distance we demanded calls for a plurality of standpoints. And a change of perspectives is essential in this regard. Dialogue is not a question of entrenching oneself in the conviction that one is right. But of listening attentively to possible new insights from a different point of view. This naturally implies sufficient diversity of sources (not only written, but also visual and verbal), likewise in the literature used. Above all, – and in my opinion it cannot be emphasised enough – historical research benefits greatly in terms of quality when it is performed in a team context. This is because the more diverse the research group's composition, the greater the chance of success for the desired change in perspectives. Nevertheless, a certain common ground related to theory and methodology is required. And this brings me seamlessly to the third and fourth lessons. Interdisciplinarity – often more a buzzword than actual added value – could be interesting, on condition that first and foremost it respects the «disciplinarity» of the distinctive disciplines. This is demonstrated by the collaboration we set up with the philosophers of education in the context of our scientific research community (Smeyers & Depaepe, 2015). In this sense, as far as we are concerned, it is still important to seek the disciplinary identity of educational historiography. And in our opinion, this lies much more in the interpretation rather than the description. Therefore, in our work we have tried to increase awareness of theory, including through the introduction of the concept of «pedagogisation». We are thrilled that this conceptual key to a better understanding

of the history of education has been taken up, as a result of the actions of among others David Labaree (2008) in the United States — all the more so since it was initially intended to complement the notion of the *grammar of schooling* of his Stanford colleagues Larry Cuban, William Tobin, David Tyack and others. However, it is evident that such container concepts need to be further refined in the future (Depaepe, Herman, Surmont, Van Gorp & Simon, 2008).

I will leave it up to the reader to decide whether I have offered convincing arguments to support the statement made in the title. The fact is – to repeat one of my beloved quotes – that we will not escape history (or the history of education) simply by ignoring it. And together with Tom Popkewitz (1984, p. 200) whose promoter I was during his Leuven honorary doctorate in Kortrijk in 2004, I like to reverse the eternal question of the relevance of educational history: not knowing the intellectual, social and historical roots of the educational sciences is undoubtedly the best breeding ground for professional incompetence...

6. References

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