

Interview with Marc Depaepe

Entrevista con Marc Depaepe

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The name of Marc Depaepe is one that any historian of education knows, surely in connection with *Paedagogica Historica* and ISCHE, but also with regard to his countless scientific works. Marc Depaepe is currently vice rector of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, responsible for the campuses at Kortrijk (Kulak), Bruges and Ostend. He has been Head of the Department of Educational Sciences in Leuven (2001-2004) and Head of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences in Kortrijk (2004-2009). He is Co-editor-in-chief of *Paedagogica Historica*, since 2005, and member of several editorial boards of national journals in the history of education; former president of the *International Standing Conference for the History of Education* as well as of the *Belgian Dutch Society for the History of Education*; former vice-president of the *Internationale Gesellschaft für Historische und Systematische Schulbuchforschung*. Since 2010, «Fellow» and member of the «Board of directors» of the *International Academy of Education*, Depaepe is also former president of the *International Standing Conference for the History of Education* and member of the Board of directors of the *International Academy of Education*.

His research interests concern the history of educational sciences in an international perspective; the history of education in Belgium (mainly primary and preschool education); the history of colonial and missionary education in the former Belgian Congo; and the historiography, theory and methodology of the

history of education as a discipline. Already with his doctoral study, a comparative-history the evolution of pedagogy and psychology as a science, primarily in the USA, Great Britain, Germany, France, Switzerland, The Netherlands, and Belgium, he presented a work of relevance, which was translated into German (*Zum Wohl des Kindes ? Pädologie, pädagogische Psychologie und experimentelle Pädagogik in Europa und den USA, 1890-1940*, Weinheim-Leuven, 1993). So far, Depaep's publication list contains more than 600 items in 17 languages. He held lectures and presented papers in c. 40 countries. His selected readings were published in 2012 by Leuven University Press as: *Between Educationalization and Appropriation*.

In 2015 he was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Latvia in Riga.

His scientific works has deeply influenced the field of history of education, opening new paths in the research. His co-direction of *Paedagogica Historica* and his commitment to ISCHE, in particular, have managed to build a wide scientific network, thus enlarging the horizon also to non-Western countries.

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Simonetta Polenghi & Gianfranco Bandini (S.P. & G.B.): *As historians of education we would like to shed light on your Bildung. When and where did you perceive you were so interested in the history of education to make it a vocation? Were your studies in university mainly historical or pedagogical?*

Marc Depaep (M.D.): Actually, I wasn't a good student in high school. Apparently the 'encyclopaedic' way of working at the time didn't suit me, compounded by my feelings of some kind of social discrimination at the college. I came from the country and had done the preparatory year. I felt like those younger bourgeois city boys were getting preferential treatment. I withdrew into myself and was mainly interested in my mother tongue and history, because I had good teachers for those subjects. But not for classical languages, and even less for mathematics. I spent my time reading novels and writing poetry. That's why I first decided not to go to university but to enrol in an ordinary teachers' college. I immediately felt right at home, got used to the boarding school regime quickly and got great grades, which was also due to being able to continue expressing my creativity through writing. Excellent teachers helped me through a puberty crisis together with my childhood girlfriend, who eventually became my wife. As the head of my class, the teachers at the college thought it was a shame that I continue studying to become a teacher. They motivated me to switch to pedagogics

(at university). This was in line with my 'Human Sciences' diploma - a high school subject package taught at basic teachers' colleges during the 1970s as an experiment. 'History of Education' was one of my favourite subjects during my pedagogics studies. Still, I waffled between History or Empirical Research for my licentiate diploma (now called master's thesis), eventually ending up choosing the former. The combination of history and pedagogics seemed like a wonderful opportunity for me to further develop both passions; and maybe even a good way to avenge myself against the poor results of the past; or to find out what was happening in the educational system at the time. Who knows?

Afterwards, I warned in many of my publications not to overly mythologise one's own 'educational autobiography' - a concept I feel that has not gotten enough attention in the pedagogical historiography; heedful of the well-known, often hollow rhetoric of many pedagogical pioneers, that their interest for educational innovation was often rooted in dissatisfaction with their own school history.

S.P. & G.B.: *When you began your career, how was the history of education considered? And particularly in such a prestigious academic place as Louvain? Which situations did you find?*

M.D.: I had the luck of meeting Professor Maurits De Vroede at the university in Leuven. He was a pure-bred historian with a double doctorate (one from the university of Ghent, the other - a sort of qualification (like the German *Habilitation*) - from the university of Leuven). Under his guidance, I wrote my licentiate thesis (1975-1977) and he was so impressed by it that he motivated me to apply for a doctorate scholarship at the (*National*) *Fund for Scientific Research*, which I was granted. I did my doctorate under him in 1982 and was able to do a 'super doctorate' (also comparable to the German *Habilitation* and the French *Thèse d'État*) through my temporary, and later permanent, appointment at that same fund. This thesis (1989) would form the basis for my book *Zum Wohl des Kindes?* (1994). De Vroede was very pleased with it because it was actually a history of science approach of experimental pedagogics (experimental pedagogy, pedology, child study, pedagogical psychology and so on), which, at one time, he himself had wanted to start. He was also very interested in my first doctorate. The starting point was the discussion about the discipline and field of study of the *history of education* at that time and placed it in the context of a broader scientific theory. To me, the history of science seemed like one of the possible solutions for understanding the relativity of the various viewpoints.

All things considered, De Vroede was an important teacher to me. He was one of the founders of the *International Standing Conference for the History of Education* (ISCHE) (1978) and organised the first real ISCHE-conference in

Leuven (1979) – afterwards he even became its vice-chairman (1982-1985) (following Brian Simon, who received a faculty honorary doctorate in May 1980 in Leuven with De Vroede as his supervisor). Just like Brian Simon, De Vroede was a proponent of the so-called ‘social’ *history of education*, in which professional historians lashed out against the predominance of the earlier ideas which were mainly oriented towards pedagogics. This allowed me, as a novice in the field, to witness the international developments from the first row, and it fit in perfectly with my doctorate. In 1980, De Vroede took me along to the second ISCHE conference in Poland (where I spoke about my licentiate thesis) and the following year I was allowed to present an important paper about my first doctorate in Paris. Since then, ISCHE hasn’t lost its grip on me. I attended 31 of a total of 38 conferences. As far as I know, no one has attended more.

S.P. & G.B.: *No doubt you are one of the leading and recognized historians of education at present. How do you manage this worldwide role?*

M.D.: First and foremost I would like to point out that all of this isn’t just my own merit. As demonstrated by what I said before, you need a bit of luck to meet the right people at the right time. Belgium - or more precisely, Flanders - has played a very important part in the development of this professional field, probably related to its geographical position and its historic cultural roots that have been exposed to Spanish, German, French, English and Dutch influences. Even before De Vroede brought the ISCHE to Leuven in 1979, there was the foundation of the international journal *Paedagogica Historica* (PH) – which had started as an international periodical for the study of the educational history at Ghent University in 1961. First under the vice-rector at the time Robert Plancke, who as a classicist was responsible for the courses in the history of education, and then under Karel De Clerck who was the head of a renowned centre for historical and comparative approaches in education. Even though initially some reservations could be detected between both environments (ISCHE and PH) on the international forum, Leuven and Ghent, spurred on by De Vroede, were collaborating on the inventory and characterisation of the ‘pedagogical’ (in the broadest sense of the word) periodicals that had been published in Belgium since the period of the Dutch Kingdom (1815-1830) till the beginning of the 1970s. In part thanks to this pedagogical journal project, I met Frank Simon, my colleague from Ghent, and this led to a life-long friendship and collaboration (on which we also have published together in a contribution called ‘*from the workplace of the educational historian*’, but I digress). Together we also contributed to a further development of the discipline, with a focus on the historic cultural (rather than the purely social historical) perspective. Not an insignificant deepening from a paradigmatic point of view, that, without setting ourselves up as uncritical devo-

tees of Michel Foucault, did move in the direction of what the general historiographical developments had produced, as well as the history of social sciences in recent decades. As editors we purposefully breathed new life into the PH journal and made sure that, despite the rather competitive start, an olive branch was held out to ISCHE (of which we have both been chairman). This agreement was finally formalised in a contract, securing the annual output of the most important international conference of the work field through a themed issue. The motto for both of us has always been to build bridges rather than burn them. According to us, collaboration is the best recipe for success, even more so worldwide.

S.P. & G.B.: *It is difficult to select among your enormous scientific production, but we think most of us are interested in a fascinating landscape, that is the development of academic studies in Africa you analyzed in many of your essays. Which is the situation for our discipline? And for education as well?*

M.D.: My interest in Africa and more specifically Congo originates from, among others, my own family history. I even knew my great aunt, who was active as a nun in Kasai throughout most of the colonisation period of Belgian Congo. She would write home like clockwork about that period (1909-1961) and most of those letters have been preserved. They are a real goldmine for research on the mentality of the colonisation and the role the missionaries played in it. That's why we published them in a book, in the margins of a study into the role of education in the colony. The image that emerges is one of perpetual paternalisation rather than emancipation. Most likely one of the keys as to why upbringing and education have not really progressed during the post-colonial period (although the discussion as to what defines 'progress' is never ending) also lies there. Moreover, a paradox unfolds that to this day continues to determine our research interest (Karen Hulstaert is currently doing a doctoral degree on this subject): how can you do justice to authentic African culture through an 'alienating' educational system which still gets its inspiration from 'Western' contexts and traditions? And vice versa: how can one sustain oneself in a globalising world by retaining authentic culture? These questions mean much more to me than theoretical issues, more so because I currently have a few African students (two of whom are nuns) who want to do their doctoral degrees with me, without much means or official grants. The poor material conditions in which they have to work, also in their home country, contributes to, in my opinion, an ever expanding rift with the wealthy countries. I therefore consider it my duty to teach them, slightly distanced, to reflect critically on their own history, in continual dialogue. Because our 'help' should not return to imposing our own (often camouflaged neo-colonial) norms and values, while on the other hand our task is to guard the scientific level of the historical profession. That is not an easy balancing

act either. After all, and for understandable reasons, there is not a lot of tradition regarding *history of education* in Africa. Because of the practical and material challenges they face, they have other priorities when it comes to the realm of education... Furthermore: where would they find the means to fund research? Not only regarding archives, but also when it comes to connecting to current international developments. Many libraries are, in part due to the monopoly on knowledge production by journal publishers, even in these times of worldwide Internet, unable to afford expensive subscriptions.

S.P. & G.B.: *Humanities are now in great difficulties in Europe: how do you look at the future of the history of education? Are there in your opinion some relevant differences among European countries and universities, or is the landscape really quite sad everywhere?*

M.D.: That the *history of education* often has to row against the current is obvious. Since I have already published numerous things on this subject (once collected in the 'ten commandments' of *good practices*), I can be brief on the matter. At first glance, there does not seem to be much room for historical, let alone historical-pedagogical reflection in our evidence-based management culture, to which social scientific research has fallen victim. But this is not a new trend. Those, like me, who study the history of the work field will find that this aversion is actually a constant; a leitmotiv through the long history of the pedagogical historiography. Nevertheless, history can never be calculated away wholesale, which includes education or educational policy. As I have often claimed through witticism, one cannot escape history by ignoring it; something you become more aware of as you get older. At the same time, the question must be asked 'which' history of education do we really need? In the never-ending debate about the 'relevance' (see e.g. my discussions with the late Richard Aldrich on this subject) many want to 'use' history to learn lessons (at various levels). This is also the reason why, from the second half of the 19th century on, discipline had such a central role in teacher training programmes throughout most of Europe. It opened a moral and ethical perspective on the high task of upbringing and education in the framework of the creation of the nation state. As this type of 'educationalization' of the field was pushed back in the 1960s and 1970s by the arrival of professional historians, the degree course component seemed to become less interesting to future pedagogues and teachers. This is why the historization of discipline led to it being pushed back from the curriculum of all kinds of pedagogically oriented programmes, first in the Anglo-Saxon countries, but later even in most of the remaining European countries. Including Germany which, regarding theoretical approach, once had made the historical-systematic approach into the object of 'general pedagogics'. The presence of the historical dimensions in current edu-

cational training and research is probably best guaranteed in the regions under the sphere of influence of the Iberian Peninsula (in Latin America, to be more precise, where it is connected to philosophical and anthropological traditions within the social sciences, which incidentally has led to innovative productions).

S.P. & G.B.: *According to your experience, are there any fields becoming prominent in the research of the last twenty years? Is history of education leaving definitively behind theories and philosophical approaches to analyze more and more the material conditions of schools and what is called now the «historical and educational heritage»?*

M.D.: The fact that the historical approach is no longer at the centre of research and/or education in educational sciences does not mean that the historical research of pedagogical processes and phenomena itself has not increased. On the contrary. The supply of research through books, journal articles and internet contributions - both good and not so good - appear to be growing with some consistency. This may seem paradoxical, but of course it isn't. On the one hand, the number of professional researchers in humanities has increased immensely in the past fifty years. On the other hand, there has been noticeable interest in the educational past during recent decades, both from the side of history (finally, some will say) and from other social sciences. Globally this has led to more attention for history of educational realities, in which, as we have tried to demonstrate through our own research, both the everyday and the material must play a prominent role. In part due to the large normativity of the sources, for far too long attention has been paid exclusively to the question of how education 'should' be instead of how effective it 'was'. But in my opinion, it would be just as wrong to conclude that we should have no more interest whatsoever in the philosophical or ethical side of the matter. On the contrary. That is exactly why I, together with my colleague Paul Smeyers – an international leading philosopher of education – started a working group in Leuven to reignite the dialogue between historians and philosophers, each from their own identity and discipline (though without aiming for a new historical-systematic synthesis, like the German general pedagogy!). So far this has yielded some fantastic results, also regarding the material conditions of school (which even sparked interest from Germany in a recent issue of the prominent *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*).

S.P. & G.B.: *Most of the European associations of historians of education are now suffering both for economic reasons, and for the diminishing number of their members. How do you see the role of ISCHE in this critical situation? Do you perceive ISCHE has been or will be affected by these difficulties?*

M.D.: In the area of scientific organisation we simply must try to fight proliferation. It seems to be human nature for everyone to try to establish his or

her own 'empire'. In this regard, an important organisational task is reserved for ISCHE, once perceived as the coordinating organisation for all national associations. I have seen ISCHE grow steadily and become more professional, and that warms my heart. The possible aberration of 'working groups' gaining more and more independence was limited. Although I am not convinced that the planned linking of membership to an annual contribution will bear the anticipated fruits. I think we should dare to strive towards structures; 'open places and spaces' where researchers can meet on a regular basis. A sort of annual market where research progress can be displayed and, more importantly, discussed by those involved.

All of the above has amply demonstrated that I am in favour of interdisciplinary work in the real sense of the word; to try and bring together as many researchers as possible, from different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds, in the hope that they will effectively tackle the common issues. That is the future, not the dialogue of the deaf between individuals, mired in the conviction of being right.

The decline in the number of members of national associations might also be related to that. Fewer and fewer researchers identify with a 'discipline'. People are more drawn by content, questions, domains, issues, which by the way, create new forms of collaborations and promote the proliferation I spoke of earlier.

S.P. & G.B.: *On the basis of your long and deep experience, which advices could you give to young historians of education to develop their researches? For example, how could technologies change the methodologies and the way to manage primary sources? Or in which manner the philosophy of the «open access» has changed the possibility to make research, forgetting the hard and dusty work in archives?*

M.D.: My main advice to young researchers is: try and collaborate as much as possible! I know that in historical research people still cling to the idea that an issue should be explored by a single researcher (with the pernicious effect of parcelling and monopolisation of the research within 'my' area and 'my' domain, best not to be tread on by others...). While collective research is much more interesting and fun. A pleasure shared... but also shared competences! As I said before (and as I have tried to demonstrate in several research projects and various publications), for me the future lies in collaboration across both the national, historic cultural borders *and* the often spurious boundaries of professional fields. Besides, team work is a wholesome way to learn to live with the diversity that is surrounding us; diversity of methods, diversity of question formulation, diversity of sources, diversity of literature; in short diversity of paradigm. Here too my advice to future researchers is: cherish this diversity and strive for a plurality of perspectives and explanations! In this way alone you become capable of seeing and, where possible, transcending the complexity and the various layers

and paradoxes of the past. So don't expect too much from hyped 'turns' in the professional field. According to us, there is no *one* ultimate source, method or technology. Synthesis and depth must counterbalance each other, just like source research and literature. A computer can of course be of help with this, as well as complete *open access* to contemporary journal articles (which undoubtedly could lead to a democratisation of knowledge, even for developing countries, as a positive effect), but these are only technological means that can advance the research. The most important part remains the researcher, or rather the team of researchers that is able to make a creative contribution to knowledge development, and that is always difficult to predict.

S.P. & G.B.: *Notwithstanding the crisis, as a matter of fact, in the last few years in the field of the History of education a large amount of new and fresh scientific journals have been created. How do you explain this trend?*

M.D.: As I have said several times before, this apparent contradiction is one of the paradoxes of the development in the field. Simply because a discipline is featured less often on the educational curriculum does not mean research into it ceases to exist. Both developments have their own dynamic which is influenced by various factors. Most of these were discussed in the previous questions.

S.P. & G.B.: *What do you think at present the role and function of the History of education could be, when we see it less and less included in the curriculum of university courses?*

M.D.: To end where we began - with the *Bildung*. The educational value of historical research and historical reflection, also in the field of education, is beyond dispute. At the end of my 'ten commandments' I formulated it as follows: «*the historical approach and way of thinking are far from superfluous for our society. It makes itself into a possible dam against the terror of the immediately useful. Historical research, also in the historiography of education, transcends the short sightedness of our own time by making it clear that this prevailing drive is an element of the long-term process of modernization and thereby, at the very least, holds the door open for a critical corrective that could consist of the cultivation of the culture of the non-utilitarian. Whereby history itself will demonstrate the extent to which this wish does belong to the realm of the illusion*».

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