

# Seven theses on teacher education and the purpose of education

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*Every truth has four corners: as a teacher I give you one corner,  
and it is for you to find the other three.*

Confucius

## One - Vision

Education must be guided by the vision of society we want our children to live in. It is roughly in these words that the Chilean sociologist Eugenio Tironi<sup>1</sup> describes the “raison d’être” and guiding principle of education. I can only agree. Education does not happen in a vacuum, education policy makers and education practitioners both are anchored in a society and in views about what is and what it is not desirable for the present and for the future of this society (whether they say so or not). To dissociate ones values from ones actions, in our case actions in education, despite being widespread practice, is neither ethically acceptable nor is it helpful for living together in this society in the medium and long term.

## Two – Choices

The biggest challenge we are facing today is to ensure that our societies can further develop globally, maintaining and improving the living conditions and the well-being of all citizens of this world.

We must make a choice regarding the future of society. Do we imagine a world that is governed by the myth of eternal economic growth, which by its mode of production and reproduction depletes and destroys natural resources and people’s health, where well-being is chiefly counted in material belongings, where a small proportion of the world population lives on the continued poverty or near-poverty of the majority, and where such gaps in justice and wealth foster ideas of vengeance and revenge, preparing the ground for further conflicts, for totalitarian ideologies and regimes?

Or do we imagine a different society on a global scale? Do we imagine a society, based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law, a society, which is economically, environmentally, societally and politically sustainable? If we do, then we need education that mobilises the intellectual and emotional potential of every citizen, so that each can contribute to making this vision become reality.

## Three - Purpose

If we agree that the vision of a desirable society shall serve as a guiding principle for education we can turn to the question of purpose. Paraphrasing the discussions at the second meeting of the Magna Charta Taskforce on the Idea of the University of the Future (Luxembourg, 2006) we can postulate a three-fold purpose: Reproduction of the existing, critique of the existing, and expanding the understanding of the existing.

Education today is seems to be governed mainly by the first consideration, reproduction of the existing, and to a smaller extent the third, expanding our knowledge. However, if we are to face the challenges of the global world today, we will need a good balance of all three purposes. Remaining under the primacy of reproduction and pushing the critique, the questioning of the existing, into the background, we may not find the answers our world urgently needs. For this we need to build on

creativity and innovation, on unconventional enquiry and thinking, things, which are not developed by the transmission of a set of, received knowledge items and a set of static skills.

The Council of Europe proposes to look at the purpose of education from a slightly different angle by maintaining that: « ... the full range of purposes of education” need to be addressed<sup>2</sup>:

- Preparation for the labour market
- Preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies
- Personal development
- Development and maintenance of a broad knowledge base

Again, the importance lies in the balance, a horizontal balance, of the different purposes, which need to be developed equally for everyone and not vertically in the sense that for some people it could be enough to just develop one or the other, or perhaps two out of the four.

#### **Four – The three “Ps”**

Our vision of a desirable future for society defines the purposes of our educational action. However for “purpose” to become reality we need two more “Ps”: ‘policy’ and ‘practice’ or rather those who make the policy and those who make the practice. In short we also need a fourth ‘P’, we also need ‘people’. We need the policy makers and practitioners who share a view of the purpose of education and whose actions are guided by this same purpose. Both groups have a vital role to play and while being complementary it must be clear that policy makers are there to support practitioners so that the latter are able to create a practice, which reflects the values and principles which underpin the choice made earlier: the desired society we want and we want our children to live in.

#### **Five – Purpose and its effects**

Everything downstream in education will be influenced by the purpose for which it is undertaken: how education is organised, which educational offer is proposed, the curriculum, what is taught and how it is taught, how teachers are trained – or educated – before they enter practice and how they are trained while in service. It will even influence what we think about education and knowledge and about how learning is taking place. And it will influence the way we think about the quality of education and how we attempt to measure it.

If we choose reproduction of the existing as the major purpose for our educational action, a big part of our educational system and practice will be dedicated to the transmission of a set of received knowledge. Teaching practices which focus on an efficient transmission will be highly favoured and taught in pre- and in-service training to the expense of educational practices more focused for example on the development of the personality, or on critical thinking and self-directed learning.

Practices and policies, which favour efficient and effective transmission of -unquestioned - knowledge, will be highly valued and our instruments of measurement will target precisely that efficient transmission of canonised knowledge closing the circle of self-fulfilling prophecies.

The development of transversal, soft, skills and attitudes such as the ability and disposition to act in a democratic way, to think critically, to accept and open up to diversity, creativity and problem-solving skills, etc. will continue to have a marginal existence. It matters little, whether these transversal skills and attitudes may find their place in policy discourse or not, as long as they are not fully integrated in the common view of what education is for, they will not influence the practice of education sufficiently to make a difference.

## Six – From teaching to learning

Taking the vision of a sustainable democratic society as the guiding principle for the purposes education shall serve in a balanced manner, and the implications this decision has for the practice of education and the expected outcomes for the individual learners, we are forced to accept a paradigm shift in educational policy and, above all, educational practice. We need to worry less about the Great Didactica than about the Matetica as Comenius<sup>3</sup> called the art of learning. We need to move towards a pedagogy, which builds on learning as a process of interaction, on collaborative knowledge construction, on a holistic view of the learner, not any longer divided into their cognitive, pragmatic and affective dimensions, a pedagogy which leads to empowerment and not just to the reproduction of existing knowledge items and practices. In short, we need a pedagogy, which looks more towards learning than towards being taught.

We need a pedagogy which takes account of the individual as a whole, and which develops the individual's awareness, his or her knowledge and understanding as well as their practice as a person and as a social actor. A pedagogy, which challenges the views of the learner, which offers new experiences and above all the opportunity to think about it and reflect on it together with peers. Last but not least a pedagogy, which understands itself as a facilitation of learning rather than a highly structured transmission of knowledge: interactive, by doing and by doing things with others. To speak with Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991)<sup>4</sup>: "Learning is a social process that occurs through interpersonal interaction within a cooperative context. Individuals, working together, construct shared understandings and knowledge." An interesting and informative overview of the thinking about learning can be found in the online library of "infed", the encyclopaedia of informal education <http://www.infed.org>.

It goes without saying that if we want teachers to develop that kind of pedagogy and educational action they will need to experience it themselves beforehand.

They need to experience the mutual support they can gain from peers, challenging their own and their peers' ideas, learning about different ways of doing and getting the chance to reflect on their actions, their practices and values together with others. This is why networking takes on such an importance. Technology has moved forward since Ivan Illich spoke of "learning webs" back in 1973.<sup>5</sup> Today, web sites and blogs, online databases and the like, targeting education professionals, abound. They are either for teachers of a particular discipline offering lessons plans and other resources or they seek to offer a space to discuss more general issues teachers face, such as the best use of technology, sharing of teaching resources across the curriculum, a space to partake in debates on ongoing issues practitioners may face<sup>6</sup>.

The Pestalozzi Programme of the Council of Europe and the European Wergeland Centre established by the Norwegian authorities in cooperation with the Council of Europe are currently working on a networking platform for education professionals to support a growing Community of Practice of education professionals across the wider Europe. Education professionals who believe that a change of paradigm in educational practice becomes necessary when you transpose the vision, the values and principles of the Council of Europe – democracy, human rights and the rule of law – into educational practice.

This is also reflected in the recent publication of the Pestalozzi Programme "Teacher education for change" which is intended as a contribution to the ongoing debate - more necessary than ever - on the role of teachers and teacher education in the broader context of teaching and learning for a sustainable democratic society.<sup>7</sup>

## Seven - Obstacles

As always there are obstacles. I do not want to talk about the general resistance to change and all the possible causes for this. I would like to pick out just two, which seem very important to me. First I would like to highlight an obstacle closely related to education: a resistance to learning, or as Thomas Szasz puts it “Every act of conscious learning requires the willingness to suffer an injury to one's self-esteem. That is why young children, before they are aware of their own self-importance learn so easily; and why older persons, especially if vain or important, cannot learn at all.”<sup>8</sup>

It is not always easy to let go of what one esteems to know, of certainties and convictions, results of previous learning processes. It needs a readiness to put in question what has served us (well) in various ways up to now. This is the true challenge hiding behind the widely used term and concept of lifelong learning: Are we still ready to learn?

The second obstacle relates to concepts themselves and the way we use them or the place they take in our action.

Of course there is the power of the individual to define the meaning of the terms and concepts they use. How they perceive education, knowledge and teaching. Many will feel that the notion of teaching contains, of course and by definition, the notion of learning as a central element. But is it so? And if yes, in which way is it so? Do we conceive of learning as a result of teaching only or do we understand that learning is something the learner is doing by actively engaging in the process? What are the main conscious and unconscious connotations our use of the notions of learning and of teaching transports, and what's more, which are reflected in our day-to-day educational practice? That is where the power that definitions of terms and concepts have over us comes into play as well as the fact that they - sometimes insidiously - transport a meaning we have thought to have left behind a long time ago.

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<sup>1</sup> Tironi, Eugenio. *El sueño chileno*. Santiago. Aguilar Chilena de Ediciones. 2005

<sup>2</sup> Final Declaration of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education “Building a more humane and inclusive Europe: role of education policies”, Turkey, 2007

<sup>3</sup> Johann Amos Comenius, *Didactica magna in Opera didactica omnia* (1657)

<sup>4</sup> David Johnson, Roger Johnson and Karl Smith, *Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom*, Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co., 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Illich, Ivan (1973a) *Deschooling Society*, Harmondsworth: Penguin. 116 pages; and also

<http://www.preservenet.com/theory/Illich.html>

<sup>6</sup> For example <http://www1.teachertube.com/>; <http://teachersteachingteachers.org/>

<sup>7</sup> Huber, Josef, Mompoin, Pascale (eds), *Teacher education for change: The theory behind the Council of Europe Pestalozzi Programme*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Szasz, 1973, psychiatrist, author and Professor Emeritus in Psychiatry at the State University of New York