

Freedom of education within a firewall

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Mister Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

If I were to go to Africa, I could find a tribe that has no written tradition. Suppose I was a linguist, I could study the tribe's language. I could write a study about their grammar, their syntax and so on. But, if I were to show my report to the tribal chief, he would not be able to understand it. If I were to explain to him his own language in terms of verbs, substantives, and inversions, he would not understand, because he is unaware of the hidden principles behind his own language. Maybe he would look at me as if he was looking in a mirror for the first time in his life. Ladies and gentleman, please bear this in mind during this presentation.

What is the situation concerning "freedom of education" in The Netherlands? As you probably know, in 1917 we created a unique system of education: every teacher or schoolmaster was given not only the right to teach according to his own religious, philosophical or educational ideas, but was given at the same time the money to exercise this right. Faith schools ("bijzondere scholen") were from then on subsidized in exactly the same way, according to the same formula, as state schools. This meant that in 1917 a balance was created between the right to learn, known as "droit d'apprendre" (as it was established in 1900 with the introduction of compulsory schooling), and the right of tuition, known as "droit d'enseigner" which means the right to teach according to one's own cultural convictions.

What has happened since then:

I. In the ominous spring of 1933, as fascism came into picture, the Dutch government was afraid of loosing sight of all of the diversity in ideas and schools and arranged to have this diversity restricted. (KB 15 may 1933) Since then only schools associated with a broadly accepted church, can claim finance from the government. To start a new school today, and to receive finance, one needs to have 200 pupils or more. (In Amsterdam 322.)

II. A second development was the growth of standardisation. Our government started formulating its own ideas, ideas about what it considered to be "good education". The result: Homeschooling was declared to be old fashioned and therefore abolished (1969). The infant classes were also abolished, (1985) and numerous directives came into force.

But to come back to where I started from. What are the axioms, what are the hidden principles of education that are accepted without discussion, as if they are selfevident. As you probably know, forty years ago, Thomas Kuhn gave a name to this set of hidden principles or unspoken set of values. He called it a paradigm. So the question is what is the paradigm behind the government's idea of "good education"? I will mention two elements:

1. The first is "the barrel" (le tonneau, das Faß).

One can make an inventory of targets that must be achieved divided by the time spend at school. This results in a barrel-filling system, based on the idea of rectilinear development. Gradually the barrel - the pupil - is filled with knowledge; systematically. This system was already called into question by Heraclitus (Ephese, 500 B.C.) Heraclitus became famous for his statement: "Education is not the filling of a barrel, but the lighting of a fire of enthusiasm."

(a) There are different ways of learning. My teacher Willem Labruyère one day wrote on the blackboard: one times one is one ($1 \times 1 = 1$). Surely that was not in any schoolbook, but it proved to be extremely useful when I was at the technical university. He taught us to make definitions. Or my history teacher Eva Tas who told us about Hammurabi's death, or another of my history teachers, Hein van den Berg, who taught us about the French revolution for an entire year, saying: "This is how I can give you an historical perspective." Or Berend Wever who, before starting his lessons, quoted "Les Âtres de la géométrie sont les triangles". Or Hendrik Theissen who told us at the primary school about Homer's Ulysses. Twenty years later I understood that it was his way of teaching us the principles of morality.

(b) Another result of the rectilinear barrel-filling system is that it is obvious that children should also learn things as soon as possible and that education should be continuous. This approach ignores the possibility of distinguishing phases of life, phases in the

way of learning. For instance: The supposed killing of fantasy and associative capacity when a child is overtaxed too early with intellectualism. Or that fractions should be taught at the beginning of abstract thinking. Or - as other educational scientists assume - that one should only offer something when a child itself shows an explicit interest in it.

(c) The same rectilinear system leads to methods of instant feed back and multiple choice. Educational scientists who claim that one should sow the seed, and wait and not dig up the plant the next day to be sure that it has already grown roots, are acting contrary to what the government calls "good education".

2. The lagging behind.

The second and completely different element, is the axiom that education should teach what society needs today. But tomorrow today is oldfashioned. This means that today's system inevitably leads to a product, the pupil, that lags behind. Our government seeks to formulate the best of all good methods of education. Something that fits into our society the best. The best education assumes that there is only one best. But we are all different and we also live in a pluralistic society. Fortunately; because as we know from nature, only pluralistic systems survive.

The barrel-filling axiom, the axiom of rectilinear phaseless development, of instant feedback, of standardised learning, of uniformity, of an intrinsic lagging behind, the axiom that our society is the best of all possibilities, is in its entirety the paradigm of our governments view of good education. We may simply call it "yesterday's barrel" and we could add that it should be filled systematically (rectilinear), as soon as possible and under constantly controlled conditions. One may agree with this system or not. But we should recognise, and our government should recognise: freedom implies the possibility to be wrong and even the right to be wrong.

However:

Today freedom of education in The Netherlands is defined to be the freedom to varnish; the freedom to put a varnish of our own choice on what the government has defined to be good education. Irrespective of whether the varnish is Roman Catholic, Reformative, Hinduistic, Steinerian, Islamic or Jewish.

Apart from the official system, if I only consider primary schools, and if I only consider private schools that are based on a different view of education, there is little to be found. There are only 7 or 8 schools with a quite detailed structure, that have in total about 100 pupils only. In addition, in a three year period, there was an explosion of "Iederwijs- scholen", 17 schools with a total of nearly 300 pupils. These schools allow the child great liberty in what they want to learn. Even if their concept proves to be a pedagogic mistake, we must allow the signal to be heard. It must not be suppressed by our government.

What all these schools have in common, is that they all survive at the margins of our educational system. And it is only in this small area that a new Maria Montessori, a new Kees Boeke, a new Rudolf Steiner, a new Célestin Freinet, a new Helen Pankhurst, a new Janus Korczak and a new Pestalozzi can operate and do their benevolent work for the future of our civilisation.

We should protect this margin, we should cherish these initiatives in the margin. But if I read the bills on private schools and on homeschooling, if I read the drafts of legislation that have been prepared for our government - new regulations, registration, control systems, specialized targets, fixation of school hours etc. - there will be nothing left in the near future.

So we have freedom of education, that is a freedom to put a varnish on our state-paid system. It is a ring-fenced system. A governmental firewall protects the established system and at the same time acts as a wall of fire that consumes any alternative system, burning down all alien paradigms. - We have freedom of education, but only within this firewall.

So the question is: "Can the definition of what should be regarded as "good education" remain a monopoly of the State? - Or not."

Thank you very much.
