

A MANIFESTO FOR EDUCATION

1. Speaking for education

Not for the first time education finds itself under attack for not delivering what it is supposed to deliver. These attacks come from two different directions: populism and idealism. Populism shows itself through the simplification of educational concerns by either reducing them to matters of individual taste or to matters of instrumental choice. It shows itself through a depiction of educational processes as simple, one-dimensional and straightforward, to be managed by teachers through the ordering of knowledge and the ordering of students, based on scientific evidence about ‘what works.’ Idealism shows itself through overbearing expectations about what education should achieve. Here education is linked up with projects such as democracy, solidarity, inclusion, tolerance, social justice and peace, even in societies marked by deep social conflict or war. Education never seems to be able to live up to such expectations and is thus constantly being manoeuvred into a position of defence. From here some try to counter populism with idealism, arguing that the solution lies in getting the agenda for education ‘right.’ Others counter idealism with populism, arguing that with better scientific evidence and better techniques we will eventually be able to fix education and make it work. Both lines of defence see the weakness of education as something that needs to be overcome. In doing so they both run the risk of taking the educational dimension out of education altogether. This manifesto aims to speak for education in a way that is neither populist nor idealist. It aims to speak out of a concern for what makes education educational, and is interested in the question how much education is still possible in our educational institutions.

2. The interest of education

We propose that to speak for education in an educational manner means to express an interest in freedom and, more specifically, an interest in the freedom of the other: the freedom of the child, the freedom of the pupil, the freedom of the student. Freedom is not license. It is neither about ‘anything goes’ nor about individual preference and choice. Freedom is relational and therefore inherently difficult. This is why educational freedom is not about the absence of authority but about authority that carries an orientation towards freedom with it. The connection between education and freedom has a long history. Whereas education was initially conceived as being exclusively for those who were already free, from the Enlightenment onwards education has become conceived as itself a liberating process, a process aimed at the realisation of freedom. Such freedom is often projected into the future, either through a psychological argument that focuses on development of inner faculties or potential, or through a sociological argument that focuses on social change, liberation from oppression and the overcoming of inequality. In this way education has not only become tied up with progress but has actually become synonymous with it. However, by conceiving education in terms of what is not *yet* – that is, by conceiving education as a process that will deliver its promises at some point in the future – the question of freedom disappears from the here and now and runs the risk of being forever deferred. This locates the educational in a place beyond reach.

3. Education in the tension between 'what is' and 'what is not'

Rather than to think of education in temporal terms – that is as having to do with the tension between what is and what is not *yet* – we suggest that the proper place of education is to be found in the tension between 'what is' and 'what is not.' Such an 'a-temporal' understanding of education can make clear what happens when one leaves the tension between 'what is' and 'what is not' and configures education either in terms of what is *or* in terms of what is not. Education under the aegis of 'what is' becomes a form of adaptation. This can either be adaptation to the 'what is' of society, in which case education becomes socialisation. Or it can be adaptation to the 'what is' of the individual child or student, thus starting from such 'facts' as the gifted child, the child with ADHD, the student with learning difficulties, and so on. In both cases education loses its interest in freedom, it loses its interest in an 'excess' that announces something new and unforeseen. The solution for this, however, is not to put education under the aegis of the 'what is not.' If we go there, we tie up education with utopian dreams. To keep education away from pure utopia is not a question of pessimism but a matter of not saddling up education with unattainable hopes that defer freedom rather than that they would make it possible in the here and now. To stay in the tension between 'what is' and 'what is not' is therefore also a matter of being responsible for the present. To tie education to the 'what is' is to hand over responsibility for education to forces outside of education, whereas to tie education to the 'what is not' is to hand over education to the thin air of an unattainable future. From an educational perspective both extremes appear as irresponsible. We therefore need to stay in the tension.

4. Dissensus, subjectivity and history

The tension between 'what is' and 'what is not' should not be understood as the golden mean between two extremes. Neither should it be understood as the fusion of 'what is' and 'what is not' into a higher synthesis. The tension between 'what is' and 'what is not' arises out of the confrontation of 'what is' with 'what is not.' It concerns the way in which 'what is' is interrupted by an element that is radically new rather than a repetition of what already exists. This interruption – which can be called 'dissensus' – is the place where subjectivity 'comes into the world.' It is the place where speech is neither repetition nor self-affirmation but is unique and uniquely new. It is, therefore, the place where freedom appears. When subjectivity is reduced to 'what is' it becomes identity understood as identification with an existing order or state of affairs. When subjectivity becomes reduced to 'what is not' it becomes fantasy; an imagined self that forever remains beyond the real. To stay in the tension between 'what is' and 'what is not' thus means to take history seriously and to take education as fundamentally historical, that is, open to events, to the new and the unforeseen, rather than as an endless repetition of what already is or as a march towards a predetermined future that may never arrive.

5. Theoretical resources and the question of educational theory

To locate education in the tension between 'what is' and 'what is not' also has implications for the theoretical resources that can be brought to bear upon education. We question whether different academic disciplines can actually fully capture the educational dimension of education and thus do educational 'work.' When the sociology of education aims to explain how education reproduces existing inequalities – either overtly or through

ideology – it operates in the domain of ‘what is.’ To utilise such knowledge educationally runs the risk of turning the individual to ‘what is’ rather than that it promotes freedom. When, on the other hand, developmental psychology understands ‘what is not’ in terms of ‘what is not *yet*’ it runs the risk of subjecting current freedom to a freedom-to-be that may never arrive. Both forms of theorising thus lead education away from the tension between ‘what is’ and ‘what is not.’ This raises the question about the possibility of forms of theorising that are able to stay within the tension. This is the question of educational theory proper as distinguished from applied and imported forms of theorising.

6. Theorising education educationally

The challenge is to develop forms of theory and theorising that have freedom as their interest and reference point. Such forms do not operate in the domain of the cognitive – where theory would tie education to ‘what is’ – nor in the domain of the normative – where theory would tie education to ‘what is not.’ Their resources rather are ethical, political and aesthetical in character. They encompass an ethics of subjectivity, a politics of emancipation and an aesthetics of freedom. An ethics of subjectivity focuses on the ways in which the subject appears as *someone* through responsible response to what and who is other. A politics of emancipation focuses on the moment where the subject speaks in a way that is neither repetition nor self-affirmation but brings something new into the world. An aesthetics of freedom highlights the mode in which common sense is transformed by assuming equality in a situation of inequality.

7. Standing up for education

This manifesto is an attempt to indicate what it might mean to speak educationally for education. We are standing up for education in order to respond to attacks and challenges that aim to tie education either to ‘what is’ or to ‘what is not,’ either to a present that is already fully known or to a future that is already fully determined but always deferred. Both positions close down education rather than that they open it up to wider possibilities. This manifesto is an attempt to articulate what it might mean to speak for education in a way that recognises what it is that makes education special, unique and proper. In this regard the manifesto aims to identify the challenges that need to be met if one wishes to stand up for education – which means to stand up for the possibility of freedom.

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