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The liberation of the child: a recurrent theme in the history of education in western societies

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The history of western societies reveals a recurring theme of standing up for the child's perspective in order to liberate the child from external authority. On the one hand this is related to the rise of enlightened theories of education since the seventeenth century. On the other hand this is related to radical changes in life circumstances of young children and their mothers and fathers in industrialized urban countries. Pleas to free children were, and are, always connected to endeavours to rethink authority and the balance between autonomy and connectedness. In this paper I put the recent interest in the child's voice into an historical perspective. Firstly I briefly discuss the liberation of the child at an ideological level; the level of the enlightened pedagogues and developmental psychologists. Secondly, I discuss changes in society that created the necessary conditions to put the enlightened ideas into practice in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Finally I discuss why listening to the child's voice is urgently needed in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Historical perspectives; Children's voice; Children's liberation*

Enlightened theories of instilling self-discipline

Enlightened pedagogues like Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Fröbel rejected the Christian dogma of original sin, and they believed that within each child was the potential for good (Wishy, 1968; Whitbread, 1972; Kessen, 1978, 1983; Rijswijk-Clerkx, 1981; Hardyman, 1984; Singer, 1992, 1993). Young children did not need to be saved from sin by strict discipline and parental authority. On the contrary: the child's nature should be followed by using their spontaneous play, curiosity, talent for mimicry, and need for active exploration. These pedagogues dreamed of creating a better society by bringing up children in a 'natural way'. Therefore they wanted to educate mothers, and they had visions of enlightened educational institutions for

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young children outside the home: the infant schools, kindergartens and nursery schools. On the one hand these pedagogues wanted to liberate the child's nature from tradition and external authority. But on the other hand they invented new 'natural' pedagogical methods for limiting the child's freedom, and for fostering self-discipline (Wishy, 1968; Walkerdine, 1984; Singer, 1992). The influence of the child's early experiences was supposed to be long-lasting and early damage irreparable. The early instilment of self-discipline should solve the tensions between individual freedom and communal interests.

The search for new pedagogical methods was related to the rise of new theories about power (for an extensive analysis of the relationships between pedagogy and theories about power, see Foucault, 1977, 1982 and Walkerdine, 1984). Before the Enlightenment, power was supposedly something visible, something that had to be applied externally. The innate tendency to evil of human beings could only be controlled by external forces. From the eighteenth century, the idea that power must be based on shared values, general interests and an agreement between individual citizens (until the twentieth century lower-class workers, women, and children excepted), gained ground. The self-disciplined individual who could make his or her own decisions was, and still is, seen as the key to a democratic community.

According to enlightened pedagogues, education should be directed towards internalising rules, values, standards and knowledge; towards an individual who is independently able to judge between good and evil, truth and falsehood, and independently able to acquire knowledge. Discipline should be 'natural', taken for granted, and come from 'within' rather than be enforced externally. Roughly, we can distinguish pedagogues who accentuate the role of early habit formation and the conditioning of children's behaviour from those who stress the role of maternal love in the development of self-discipline.

Early habit formation and conditioning children's behaviour

Locke (1964) focused on early habit formation. Habits learnt by children when very young appear to them natural and even taken for granted. They don't know any better, and that prevents struggles. Apart from this, parents should observe their children, Locke advised, and determine their capabilities and limitations. Parents were encouraged to use children's natural tendency towards imitation, curiosity and play, while ignoring inappropriate behaviour that would, in time, disappear without external influence. Locke's view was that excellent people learn while very young to resist unreasonable behaviour. For this reason he was against spoiling children. Young children were expected to accept their parents' authority completely. Only later could a more friendly relationship become possible.

Contrary to Locke, Rousseau rejected in 'Emile' (1983) any form of habit forming. Rigid rules for eating and sleeping should be resisted. But Rousseau also warned against spoiling. Spoilt children do not learn their own powerlessness and dependence: quite the opposite, they feel all-powerful, and demand that others satisfy every need. Make use of 'natural' punishments, he advised. The pedagogue can give

'nature' some help by manipulating the child's environment. Thus, Emile's governor orders the gardener to destroy Emile's garden: through this Emile would learn about the right of ownership. Emile's environment appears to be natural, but in fact is carefully planned.

> Let your pupil always believe that he (sic) is the master, but in fact be the master yourself. No other subjection is so complete as that which keeps up the pretence of freedom; in such a way one can even imprison the will. (Rousseau, 1983, p. 130)

Both Locke and Rousseau can be seen as predecessors to the later behaviourists who researched early habit formation and methods of conditioning children's behaviour (Sears, 1975; Kessen, 1978, 1983; White, 1983; Singer, 1992).

Maternal love and self-discipline

Other pedagogues sought, and still seek, the psychological anchoring of morals in the emotional bond between mother and child. In the *School of infancy* (*Mother school* was the original title), one of the oldest books on early education, Comenius (1963) recommended following nature and imitating what mothers do naturally. He, and many pedagogues after him, compared the work of the pedagogue to that of a gardener. Parents should restrict, water, cut and nurture the budding plant. The more freely the child is able to move, the better they will sleep and grow, and the fresher and quicker their body and spirit will become. According to Comenius, children under the age of six do not belong at schools. They need more personal and individual attention than a teacher (in the seventeenth century) is able to give within a group. Comenius, like all enlightened pedagogues, states that more freedom for the child is intrinsically related to more supervision by the nanny or mother. The child can be free, because he or she does not have to worry about the safety of the environment and the goodness or badness or his or her behaviour.

According to Pestalozzi (1804), to avoid losing the love of their mothers, children will renounce their selfish desires. Without maternal love, the child's instinctive impulse would develop into 'a thousand artificial needs and eventually end in complete selfishness' (Pestalozzi, 1956, p. 140). According to Dutch pedagogy in 1827, the young child develops a 'pleasant impulse to sociability' and an attachment to the mother (Mulder, 1827, pp. 7–10). Children become anxious with strangers or if the mother leaves. Separation anxiety makes the child aware of dependence on the parents or caregivers, and will motivate the child to natural obedience. Children who are not worried about separation from their mother or about losing her love miss the psychological basis for love and the fear of God: they know 'no God or Command'.

As far as Fröbel (1928) was concerned, maternal love was a symbol and the highest manifestation of Divine unity. Like Pestalozzi, he was of the opinion that selfishness was the result of 'disturbed community feeling'. Invisible but ever-present guidance through maternal love would make external discipline unnecessary. But maternal love alone is not enough, he said, mothers often lack pedagogical abilities, knowledge and education. To educate mothers Fröbel designed the 'kindergartens' for children from

the age of one to seven years. He designed one of the first pedagogical methods based the idea of learning by play: highly symbolic nursery songs and games for mother and child; plaiting strips of paper; sticking pictures and little pieces of work.

The pedagogical theories of Comenius, Pestalozzi, Mulder and Fröbel foreshadowed the twentieth-century developmental psychological theories of mother-child attachment and of playful responsive stimulation of the child (Singer, 1992).

The rise of scientific theories of development

Since the seventeenth century enlightened pedagogues have argued that proper upbringing means upbringing based on knowledge of the needs and natural development of children. To this end, pedagogues like Pestalozzi and Fröbel designed developmental theories consisting mainly of religiously inspired contemplations on the 'essence' of the child, and the 'godly laws of development'. According to Pestalozzi and Fröbel, the child needs maternal love which reflects the love and belief in the Creator. Both pedagogues of the eighteenth century also backed up their contemplations by observing children's natural development. Comenius and Fröbel describe in detail how mothers could exercise their children's abilities: 'for instance, pointing to the light: 'there is the light', taking it away: 'Now it is gone'. Or 'Father's coming', 'Father's gone' (Fröbel, 1928, p. 147). From the end of the nineteenth century the religious contemplations gradually disappeared, and the observations became more important; scientists tried to discover the truth about children through empirical research into child behaviour.

In America in the 1890s and 1920s, two child-study movements were started (Sears, 1975; Lomax, 1978). Their prime aim was to make upbringing more scientific. Parents and teachers were to follow children's 'natural development' according to scientific theories and descriptive research (Gesell, 1940; Hall, 1995) and by applying theories on natural laws of effects of reward and punishment (Thorndike, 1903; Watson, 1928). In Europe there were comparable child-study movements (Preyer, 1890). Large groups of children were researched in order to discover average growth curves and the natural laws involved. Just like the enlightened pedagogues, the twentieth-century child psychologists made moral statements (White, 1983). These moral statements, however, were couched in neutral terms. Instead of Divine Laws and God's Comments, twentieth-century psychologists wrote about scientifically founded goals of 'healthy and 'normal' development. 'Deviations form the norm' had to be corrected, and tests were developed in order to do this (Kessen, 1983; Walkerdine, 1984).

Modern life: the invention of the 'child's world'

Until the nineteenth century, the ideas of enlightened pedagogues were seldom put into practice. Only affluent middle-class and upper-class families could afford nannies to free mothers of domestic tasks and work outside the family to devote themselves to bringing up their children according to the enlightened fashions of their

time. Besides that, Pestalozzi and Fröbel believed that education was a science: mothers needed to be educated to become good mothers. Only women of affluent enlightened families were able to study the 'women's science' (Taylor-Allen, 1982). This situation changed dramatically in the nineteenth and twentieth century, because of complex processes of industrialization and urbanization. Especially, the split between paid work and the home changed the relationships between children and adults, and males and females.

The city environment meant a break with the old ties and traditions of the rural areas. The separation between the place of work and the home made it impossible for working parents to take care of and keep an eye on their children at home (McCann, 1966; Rijswijk-Clerkx, 1981; Clarke, 1985; Shapiro, 1985; Pence, 1986). Young children were often supervised by older children and brought to childminders or dame schools. Among the upper and middle classes fear grew for the neglected children making a living of pickpocketing and growing up without discipline. Besides that, because of the split between paid work, the home socialization and the transmission of knowledge through day-by-day contact between working adults became problematic. Farmers' children, for instance, learned to take care of cows from the time they could walk by accompanying their mother and father at work. Participatory learning and apprenticeship with a skilled worker that is so characteristic in rural societies became restricted to specific areas such as housekeeping, gardening and doing odd jobs (Rogoff, 1990).

Several motives—fear of criminality of neglected lower-class children; need to prepare children for formal education; need of care and education because parents work outside the home—led to philanthropic initiatives of enlightened citizens to start infant schools during the first part of the nineteenth century. The school and the child centres were invented to bridge the gap between home and the world of paid work. These institutions can be seen as the symbols of the apart 'child's world' in our culture. These 'child's worlds' had to be filled up.

At the start of the nineteenth century the child centre (infant schools at that time) could be seen as a socially 'empty' space. The space was socially empty because at that time there were no pedagogical traditions for working with young children in groups (McCann, 1966; McCann & Young, 1982; Singer, 1992), but also because the children were excluded from the adult world, literally by school walls. The first enlightened pedagogues had great educational theories, but few ideas about how to put them into practice. Teaching and learning experiences had to be designed for these children's worlds. What should be done with 10, 20 or 50 young children packed together in one room? McCann (1966) describes the almost traumatic first experience of the Englishman Wilderspin, who was later to write a number of influential textbooks. The first morning, 38 children were brought to Wilderspin's first infant school in 1826. As the mothers left, the entire group burst into tears crying, 'Mummy, Mummy!' Wilderspin was forced to leave the classroom, exhausted by his efforts, the fear and the voices. He left behind a mass of screaming children kicking at the door. In desperation, Wilderspin grabbed his wife's hat with colourful ribbons, perched it on top of an old mop and rushed back into the classroom. To his

astonishment the children stopped crying. Before total chaos could break out again he had an inspiration and yelled: 'Now we are to play "ducks"'. According to Wilderspin, his first attempt at 'learning through play' was born from necessity. It took more than one-and-a-half centuries before 'child-centred' pedagogy was invented for infant schools, kindergartens and daycare centres with their doll's houses, puzzles, construction kits and science corners.

Teachers and parents at home learned new authoritative styles of child-rearing balancing adult control and trust in the child's autonomy (Kessen, 1983; Hardyman, 1984). Thanks to the pedagogical methods of Fröbel, Montessori, Isaacs, Malaguzzi and many local progressive pedagogues, methods were developed to facilitate and supervise young children's spontaneous play within a restricted environment: methods for learning by doing and learning by play (Weber, 1969; Rijswijk-Clerkx, 1981; Singer, 1992; Edwards *et al.*, 1993). All these very diverse methods, from Fröbel's religious inspired 'play gifts', 'pieces of work' and 'nursery rhymes' to Malaguzzi's 'hundred languages of children', have in common that they accentuate the child's activity and the child's role as an active learner.

Since the nineteenth century, child centres (infant schools, nursery schools and daycare centres) have been regularly criticized because of learning by the rod, group teaching, harsh discipline, lack of creativity, lack of challenge and boredom. Progressive educators developed methods and curricula based on active learning, and movements of enlightened women tried to propagate the progressive educational methods of their time (Forest, 1929; Weber, 1969; Ross, 1976; Taylor-Allen, 1982; Shapiro, 1985). History also shows that all progressive educational methods can deteriorate into rigid methods and orthodoxy, devoid of their original progressive kernel. Fröbel's activity method that was developed in the second half of the nineteenth century was criticized in the twentieth century: children had to reproduce 'mat-plaiting' and other 'work' (Cavallo, 1976; Ross, 1976). Montessori's method was criticized for the same reasons: too rigid and no room for the creativity of the child (Dewey & Dewey, 1962). Patty Smith Hill, one of the first female professors in early childhood education at Columbia University in the 1920s, was inspired by Dewey and supervised an experimental kindergarten. In this university kindergarten much space was given to creative activities and social life. To facilitate learning by doing, there were building bricks for building big houses; there were ladders, slides and swings, and smaller objects such as cars, pots and pans. She wanted to show scientifically the value of her kindergarten and described all the abilities that children learn during play. In the 1930s Patty Smith Hill's 'conduct curriculum' turned into a detailed 'habit program', developed by one of her successors, Agnes Law Rogers. The curriculum prescribed the training of habits like: 'Desirable changes in thought, feeling and conduct: to get pans quietly and without dropping them; to pour water from partly filled pitcher into pan and to carry without unnecessary splashing; et cetera' (cited in Snyder, 1972, p. 263). Rogers believed in tests: 'mental tests will ultimately mean control of human behaviour' (Weber, 1969, p. 106).

The creation of schools and child centres, that is social empty spaces, also had far-reaching consequences for the sort of educational aims that parents sought.

Previously, children had been brought up to be bakers, farmers or housewives. Now, children are brought up to be flexible employees in a fast-changing society; they must 'learn to learn'. The development of the child becomes, in itself, an aim. Developmental psychologists filled up the emptiness created by the disappearance of concrete social goals with standards for 'normal' development in physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral fields. The social and personal meaning of behaviour—does she help her parents well? Does she like butterflies?—receded into the background, in order to make way for scores on development charts. The child was constantly checked and compared with the average child.

Invention of the child and 'natural development'

In *The American child and other cultural inventions* (1983), William Kessen defends the statement that the child, as well as the developmental psychologist (and the pedagogue, I would add), are cultural inventions. In western countries a separate world was created where children were allowed to play, learn and spend their free time. According to Kessen, developmental psychology is, in the twentieth century, one of the creative powers behind new images of children and practices that filled up the empty child's world. This filling up with images and practices was needed because goals and norms based on living and gradually participating in the adults' duties were lost. In the child centres teachers needed norms to know that they were on the right track. Weber (1969) linked the popularity of tests and observation diagrams with the difficulty encountered by teachers when trying to place abstract principles such as 'follow natural development' or 'learning by doing' into a concrete form or teaching plan, if the child itself is the starting point as well as the goal. One solution to this problem is to have a clear picture of 'normal' development. Development has to observable and measurable, in order to establish progress, and to give the teacher something to go by. Today, testing using observation diagrams is rarely seen as progressive and child-centred. But if we look back through history we can say equally that child-centredness and observations and tests presuppose one another. In connection with this, Walkerdine (1984) speaks of the 'psychology-pedagogy couple', a developmental psychology that gives the standards for pedagogical action, or, put in a different way, a pedagogy that results in the construction of 'natural development'.

Lessons from history for the twenty-first century advocates of young children's voices

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are more children in specially-designed child worlds (playgroups, daycare centers) than ever before. Mothers of all social classes are working outside the home, because of financial necessity and personal career motives. Once again there is a critique that caregivers and teachers hardly speak with babies and toddlers in childcare centres (Tizard & Hughes, 1984; Gardner, 1993; Singer, 1996; Riksen-Walraven, 2002); the children are silenced and often spend their time wandering around and unoccupied (Moss & Penn, 1996). For

the first time in history many children, from babyhood, spend a considerable part of their waking hours at institutions for childcare and education. The duration of their stay is mostly dictated by the working hours of their parents. This can cause a lot of stress in young children because they still depend on non-verbal communication and need familiar caregivers who know them and who understand their non-verbal signals. So the issue of sensitivity towards the needs and rights of young children in institutionalized care should again be put high on the pedagogical agenda.

What can we learn from history in this regard? Firstly, that liberation of the child always goes hand in hand with new forms of discipline. Since the seventeenth century enlightened pedagogues and progressive psychologists have intensively discussed the issues of selfishness, self-discipline, connectedness, obedience, commitment to moral frameworks and power in the relationship of children and educators. The imbalance of power between the child and parent or teacher is inherently related to education. So the question is: how do parents and teachers use their power towards children?

Secondly, childcare centres are special, designed child's worlds, that have to be filled up. Childcare centres are cultural inventions, as are the images of the child that inspire curricula and educational methods. Parents and teachers need images and norms to evaluate their work and to evaluate the children's well-being and learning processes. These norms, observation methods or tests are also cultural inventions of adults that structure interactions with the children. Even 'learning stories' or 'teaching stories' are based on ideas about norms, that is, what is worthwhile to observe, to write down and to discuss (Carr, 2001).

Thirdly, all new forms of progressive education that put the child's activity and creativity in the centre imply new forms of disciplining of the child. All methods can turn into orthodoxy and silence discussions with opponents; all methods can be translated into practice in a mechanical and child-silencing way. So let's celebrate and scrutinize all progressive methods. Seeking the ultimate method to guarantee children's active participation is, for this author, a utopian dream. Instead, this author supports the plea to give young children a voice. Every childcare centre, every teacher and parent should be obligated to answer the question of how the child's voice is heard in daily practice, and how the child's voice is evaluated in decision making. By giving children a voice and listening to them, we may counterbalance our adult tendency for routines, taken-for-granted knowledge and orthodoxy.

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