

# Pedagogy is Coming Back! Some Hopeful Signs for Sustainable General Education and Worldview Education

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## Abstract

Neo-liberal voices are still very strong in education broadly speaking and have a marginalizing impact on normative pedagogies like religious, worldview, moral and civic education. But there are clear and hopeful signs that pedagogy is coming back. After sketching the current situation and its antecedents, the author addresses the views and ideas here provided by pedagogical spokespersons, teacher-leaders and teachers – most of them working in the domain of religious education or worldview education. How do they perceive the current changes in more normative and pedagogical-laden directions? What precisely has caused these changes? Is the return of pedagogy just a temporal hype or is it a real revitalization? What have been the consequences for them professionally and personally speaking? It is the author's intention and hope that this article will encourage educators in general and religious and worldview educators in particular with an eye on fostering sustainable pedagogical approaches.

*Keywords:* pedagogy, general education, worldview education, social sustainability, public intellectuals, normativity.

## The Current Situation

There is, in my view, still an urgent need for a continuing and sustainable awareness in education towards pedagogy as a necessary counter-voice against the still influential neo-liberal rhetoric, politics and practices in which labor-market orientation and schooling as preparation for the knowledge-based economy are praised as the core aims of education in schools. These neo-liberal voices are not only a threat for education in general but have a marginalizing effect on normative oriented pedagogical approaches such as moral, aesthetic, civic and religious or worldview education (Miedema, 2014b; Ohlmeier, 2013).

This still tremendous neo-liberal impact in education has to do with the fundamental changes that have taken place since the 90s in the educational systems of many countries like the US, the UK and also the Netherlands. Since that time there has been a shift towards far greater external, mostly governmental control over the curriculum, and a far greater emphasis on measurable output and accountability, often related to tight systems of inspection. In this process the purpose of schooling has become increasingly

defined in terms of the effective production of a pre-determined output, often measured in terms of exam-scores on so-called ‘core subjects’ such as mathematics and first language (Biesta, & Miedema, 2002; Miedema, 2014b).

This last development of education’s orientation focusing on Europe and the Europeanization of education on the labor market and education seen as preparation for the knowledge-based economy in terms of employability, flexibility and mobility, has been carefully reconstructed by Peter Schreiner on the basis of documents of the Council of Europe (being the ‘conscience’ of Europe) and the European Union. Schreiner has convincingly shown that notions such as ‘learning society’ and ‘knowledge-based economy’ cannot mask what he has been adequately characterized by him in Habermasian terminology as the ‘colonization of education policy by economic policy imperatives’, and the determination of national educational policies on the basis of economical-educational analyses (Schreiner, 2012).

Even when the notion or rhetoric of edification (*Bildung*) is recently used again by politicians and school administrators this could not hide away the fact that in educational policy and practice the basics are still overemphasized to the detriment of the formation of the whole person of the students. In respect to the fact of the use of the very concept of edification as part of the more encompassing concept of reflexivity (see Jackson, 2016, 157–158 for a broad conceptualization of this term) or the notification that the use of *Bildung* is all over the place now also internationally speaking (see for example Nussbaum, 2010), we need carefully look at what kind of connotation is really at stake here most of the time, especially used by politicians and administrators. Quite often the connotation in using this concept is that personhood formation of students means having the possibility to make those subject matter choices that fit best with the students’ own personality. So, what we see here is paying tribute to the trend of hyper-individualization. Thus the personality, the personhood of the student, is something that already exists and this already fixed personality needs to be discovered by the student her/himself. The students should be able to discover who they in essence are and what their already existing capacities are. However, a dynamic conceptualization of the notion of *Bildung*, taking into account the dynamic and emergent identity development, does not presupposes an already existing, an already given personality. On the contrary, personhood formation or *Bildung* is conceptualized as the development of the student in relationship, encounter and dialogue with the other persons and the surrounding world and thus also being confronted with oneself. This is happening in a process of socialization or participation and distantiation as an emancipatory and liberating process (see Wardekker, & Miedema, 2001a; 2001b; Wardekker, 2016).

### Sustaining the Space and Place for Pedagogy

So, the shift towards a one-sided and even narrow conception of the aim of schooling and a narrow conception of the very notion of *Bildung* or edification, makes the question as to whether there still is or could be more space and place for ‘education’ or ‘pedagogy’ in the school – an urgent one for those who are in general concerned about the purpose of schooling. A specific perspective here is related to the concept of social sustainability and (civic) education for sustainable development (Ohlmeier, 2013; Brunold, 2015). Could the pedagogical voice be strengthened in a practical, social and political way? The pedagogical contribution is of great importance because it is part and parcel of every

nation of the world. It concerns every human being, humankind and humanity in general and on a global scale and has impact on the human shaping of the world by means of practical, social and political learning processes (Miedema, & Bertram-Troost, 2015, p. 48).

This especially holds for the teachers in the schools who quite often feel that these developments miss the very point of what they think the sustainable and continuous aim of their work is all about. Our own recent research on principals of Dutch Christian elementary schools has convincingly shown that their view is fully in line with this kind of criticism. It is clear that the principals are in favor of a concern for the whole person of the students in school practiced over time during all the formative years and from the perspective of a transformative and transactional pedagogical paradigm (Miedema, 2014, pp. 89–93), instead of instructional and transmission approaches of a reductionist kind. One of the most important threats the principals experience is the discrepancy between their view on edification (*Bildung*) as the core and embracing aim of their professional work, and the strong emphasis on instruction, on the basics, and on particular outcomes as such embodied in governmental policies and the way the Inspectorate of Education is operating in assessing their work (Bertram-Troost, Miedema, Kom, & Ter Avest, 2015).

Hopefully, however, I notice that the neo-liberal tanker is very slowly heaving now in more pedagogical directions. Some principals and a young generation of teachers are organizing themselves on a national scale and have a loud and strong pedagogical voice in the public domain. How do a few selected spokespersons experience the current situation and their own stance and positioning in all of this? How do they perceive the current changes in more normative and pedagogical-laden directions? What precisely has caused these changes? What have been the consequences for them professionally and personally speaking? This is the hard core issue of this paper, and I will deal with that in the reminder of this presentation.

### **Pedagogues as Public Intellectuals**

However, before doing this I will also briefly point to something that in my view is really necessary, too. This is that general educators but also religious and worldview educators should act in society at large as public intellectuals for the benefit of children and youngsters to support them in developing their self-responsible self-determination, their personhood in education broadly speaking and also in religious and worldviews education. This is necessary, because educators are nearly invisible in the public arena characterized by clashes of ‘power-knowledge,’ by knowledge-politics (Foucault, 1980). We might think that our arguments for the need of education and religious or worldview education from a pedagogical point of view are self-evident and do not require directing attention to this need of a wider public. However, we definitely need to voice our views in the public square otherwise other parties will take over our scarce space, for example in the case of religious and worldview education loud-voiced fundamentalist secularists. What might also be helpful is to try from a pedagogical-strategical perspective to position new generations of educationalist educators as gate-watchers in governmental and semi-governmental organisations and institutions to voice from within our ‘know-how’ and ‘know-that’.

So, I plea for educators especially in academia, in specific communities (e.g. religious or worldview organizations) and working as civil servants to act as public intellectuals in society at large (Miedema, 2016). Intellectuals are the fortunate possessors of a certain amount of cultural capital, with this capital they play a public role visible for everyone, and always are political issues at stake here (Nauta, 1992, p. 92). Public intellectuals share two characteristics:

- i) they have an obsession for public debates and the corresponding commitment to give account in a very comprehensible way, that is in clear and easy comprehensible language; they are not writing articles for double-blind refereed and highly cited academic journals, but appear on radio and TV and do the same for daily and weekly newspapers;
- ii) they are allergic to discrimination and the exclusion of particular groups from taking part in the debates; when such groups are not acquainted with the existing rhetorical traditions, the public intellectuals are willing and able to help such groups and are in service to allow them to ask to speak and to speak up (see also Nauta, 1987, 28–29).

What is most threatening and mostly results in not taking the role of a public intellectual? It is overstretched rationality as a means of balance or equilibrium as well as looking for the mid-position, self sought or a position pushed towards by others. The consequence is that voicing a radical and clear cut stance in the public square is avoided.

Striving as educators for impact in the public domain as public intellectuals from a strong societal commitment should, in my opinion, always go together, following a few very pragmatic rules:

- a) enjoy the public debate and give a comprehensible way account of the insights and knowledge in our discipline;
- b) avoid doing this as a fundamentalistic ‘believer’, that is in a grim, bitter and pedantic voice, but do this skilful, crystal-clear, and with humour and irony;
- c) ask your opponent in a debate again and again for information in respect to arguments and underpinning of her/his stance, and call them to account on their intellectual integrity (Miedema, 2007).

Thus, what we really need now is to find educators acting in society at large as public intellectuals for the benefit of children and youngsters to support them in developing their self-responsible self-determination, their personhood in education and in religious and worldviews education. They should take their responsibility at the place where they are or will be located nationally and globally (see Miedema, 2016).

### A Qualitative Pilot

So, is it possible to speak of the return of pedagogy? What is the actual state-of-the-art? In order to get more insight in the view of a small group of experts I carried out a qualitative pilot. So, I have sent the same question to a few selectively chosen persons respectively P1) working as identity advisor for an intermediate organization for Christian education in the Netherlands for staff as well as administrators, P2) working as teacher trainer and researcher in a teacher training institute of one of the classical and very prominent Dutch universities, P3) a teacher trainer working in a denominational, non-

religious university and an intermediate organization for this particular denominational education, P4) a teacher working in so-called international bridge-classes in one of the big cities in the area of Western Holland (the metropolitan area in between Amsterdam and Rotterdam, called the Randstad), and P5) a vice-school leader of a secondary school.

My question to them was:

*In respect to the article I am preparing with the title 'Pedagogy is coming back', I like to refer to the view of young (but also some older) people a) working as teachers in secondary schools; they might be dealing with religious or worldview education but could also be those who teach other than religious or worldview subject matters, b) but it might also be people who are dealing with religious or worldview education from a teacher trainer or advisory perspective. Do you notice the return of pedagogy in education? If so, what does this mean for you as a professional and as a person?*

In most of the cases I had some email exchanges with them after my invitation to answer my question via email. Due to their further questions and comments I have sent them also a short outline of the article I had in mind. That turned out to be very helpful for them to provide me with some clear statements from their side.

#### A Hype, Return or Revitalization of the Pedagogical?

Here I will briefly present some of the insights I got from reading and analyzing their responses and will present this in five what I characterize as vignettes:

The teacher trainer/researcher (P2) had just finalized a research project with 20 RE teachers (younger and older) in secondary schools and they all state that the pedagogical in respect to certain relationally loaded practices is very important for them. They also criticize a recent plea by an associate professor in Religious Studies for a just knowledge based curriculum in RE of worldview education. However, more than half of them state that this is what they want and do but that they experience it at the same as very difficult to realize due to time constraints that have to do with pressure from the program caused by the setup of tests and the fixed finalization of programs with an eye on the final exams. The teacher trainer's conclusion is that the teachers possess 'the pedagogical will' but there is a huge tension with the constraints of the general programming. These RE teachers have not been part of organized actions or initiatives in respect to what the experience as a huge tension between will versus possibilities.

As it seems in contrast with P2's input, the input of the teacher trainer/researcher, the identity advisor (P1) who is referring to his in service courses with teachers in secondary schools (so, not focusing exclusively on RE teachers), is positive about the way educational advisors, professional teacher training centers, administrators and a few teachers – who are writing about this issue on a national level – are dealing with the return of the pedagogical debate. He is very critical on the teachers who, when dealing with personhood formation (*Bildung*) translate this only in socializing terms: they want students to learn to be themselves, to be social and to have and show respect, instead of the students learning to reflect on themselves with regard to their surrounding and the teachers providing the students and guiding them in finding their own way – also different from the aim the teachers have in mind. His conclusion is that in the school practice the pedagogical is not realized yet.

The teacher trainer (P3) who is mainly working in the public secondary school sector states that his students tell him that they experience the disappearance of subject matter dealing with worldview and religion. Besides, the focus on personhood formation while dealing with subject matter is under pressure in favor of a more cognitively focused approach. So, his conclusion is that there is in fact more a decrease of the pedagogical approach in respect to the students. At the level of school administrators this approach might be received positively, but he does not notice a concrete and practical translation in terms of, as he formulated it, “putting your money where your mouth is”.

The vice-school leader’s view (P5) is that the pedagogical discourse is indeed coming back in education but in disguise. *Bildung* is a core concept in the school’s policy and this has even led to the predicate “excellent” given by the Inspectorate of Education to the school. The school is providing a lot of learning and thus developmental possibilities for students, and learning is not just aiming at a diploma/certificate but focusing on broad edification (*Bildung*). Crucial is the teacher as a person and his/her normative professionalism. The school is exemplifying a sort of newly invented pedagogy, with attention paid to the whole person and the human development.

The teacher of the international bridge classes (P4) is working in a school with 50 different nationalities in which 10 years ago worldview education disappeared from the curriculum. In 2011, and led by the new school leader, a process started of staff reflection on the broad identity of the school. A few values were collectively chosen and now form the basis of the school policy and the educational practices in the school. At the same time a new curriculum subject matter was chosen under the title ‘Personal Edification/ *Bildung*’ (Persoonlijke Vorming) and presented to the lower classes only. The core aim is to reflect with the students on identity and values, and the pedagogy of this approach is characterized as meaningful education. It touches the teachers in their professionalism and personality, and also the students in their sense of being and dealing with meaningful aspects of life. Other colleagues have shown curiosity in the way the pedagogy of the ‘Personal Edification’ is concretized and try to use this approach also in their own lessons where they deal with other subject matters. So, the pedagogical voice is getting greater volume. However, she also notices some constraints. At the side of the teachers these might consist of personal experiences i) with the lack of freedom in religious terms, possibly a rudiment of the past pillarized era (see Miedema, 2014a), ii) with neo-liberal no nonsense policies, and iii) with certain soft pedagogical or/and didactical novelties which have hampered their ability to teach their subject matter and which have resulted in them having developed an aversion against pedagogy. She concludes by saying that there still is a long way to go.

### Concluding Remarks

Neo-liberal voices are still rather strong in education broadly speaking and have a marginalizing impact on normative pedagogies like religious, worldview, moral and civic education. But there are clear and hopeful signs that pedagogy is coming back. After I have sketched the current situation and its antecedents, I have given the floor respectively to an identity advisor from an intermediate organization for Christian education in the Netherlands for staff as well as administrators, to a teacher trainer and researcher in a teacher training institute of one of the classical Dutch universities, to a teacher trainer working in a denominational, non-religious university and an intermediate organiz-

ation for this particular denominational education, to a teacher working in international bridge classes in one of the big cities in the area of Western Holland (Randstad), and to a vice-school leader of a secondary school.

I may carefully conclude that pedagogy is back on the agenda and that a kind of revitalization is taking place. However, the five spokespersons I have introduced here briefly have different opinions about who are at the moment the most active actors for realizing the pedagogical in the educational domain. They also have different opinions on what precisely form and produce now the constraints that hinder further realization of the pedagogical in a practical, social and political sustainable way.

However, it is my contention and hope that notwithstanding the fact that I cannot present a fully harmonious choir now that this contribution will further encourage educators in general and religious, worldview, moral and civic educators in particular to go along the road for embodying and continuous strengthening the pedagogical in their distinctive practices.

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