

A Manifesto for Education Ten Years On: On the Gesture and the Substance

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The harvest, sculpture. Gabriela López

Abstract

After ten years of publication of the “Manifesto for education” we can affirm that it did not seek to be a model for the future of education nor was it conceived to be, but nevertheless tried to express something “about” education and something “for” The education. In that sense, the “Manifesto” tried to express real and incessant concerns, for which “it is worth fighting,” whenever we consider that “fighting” is perhaps too strong a notion in a world characterized by tension and conflict. In the lines that are expressed below, we share some reflections about said manifesto, being aware that its traces and concerns are latent in those who consider education as a space of complete freedom.

“Un manifiesto por la educación” diez años después: acerca del gesto y la sustancia

Resumen

Tras diez años de publicarse el “Manifiesto por la educación” podemos afirmar que el mismo no buscó ser un modelo para el futuro de la educación ni fue concebido para serlo, intentó no obstante expresar algo “sobre” la educación y algo “para” la educación. En ese sentido, el “Manifiesto” intentó expresar preocupaciones reales e incesantes, por las que “vale la pena luchar”, siempre que consideremos que “luchar” es tal vez una noción demasiado fuerte en un mundo caracterizado por la tensión y el conflicto. En las líneas que se expresan a continuación, compartimos algunas reflexiones acerca de dicho manifiesto siendo conscientes que sus huellas y sus preocupaciones están latentes en quienes consideran a la educación como un espacio de plena libertad.

Keywords: manifest; education; freedom; fight

Palabras clave: manifiesto; educación; libertad; lucha

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The English version of the *Manifesto for Education* was published in 2011 but the actual text was written before that and the conversations that led up to the Manifesto date from even longer ago. It seems fair, therefore, to say that the Manifesto is now about a decade old. At the time of writing, Carl Anders Säfström and I were well aware of the ironic character of the ‘gesture’ of a manifesto. After all, many ambitious manifestos have been written, including manifestos for education, but no manifesto has ever managed to really change the world. And this, in my view, is a good thing because we should

not think of the world and its future in terms of the execution of some programme. After all, the world is not someone's 'project' but belongs to no one, so to speak, as it is this strange 'condition' of life-in-plurality, to use a phrase reminiscent of Hannah Arendt. A manifesto can therefore at most be a modest intervention in the existing state of affairs, a voice that sounds at a particular moment in time, a beginning that, in order to become manifest, needs to take up by others and needs to be taken up by others in their own way, beyond what was intended. A manifesto is the child that has left (the) home and is finding its way in the world.

While the Manifesto was neither a blueprint for the future of education nor intended to be so, it nonetheless tried to say something 'about' education and something 'for' education. The main thing it tried to say 'about' education was that education is not about the insertion of individuals into existing orders or, to be more precise, that education cannot and should not be reduced to this, but that education is ultimately about ways in which individuals can exist as subject. Existing *as subject*, to use Arendtian language once more, is about having the capacity to begin, to initiate and take initiative, and about having the willingness to take responsibility for what one's beginnings effect even –or particularly– when what our initiatives will lead to is a radically open and undeterminable matter. Existing as subject is therefore a matter of freedom, as we put it in the Manifesto. But this is not the freedom to do what you want to do –the neoliberal 'freedom of shopping,' as we might call it– but Arendtian freedom-as-action, of being inscribed in the web of plurality and of inscribing oneself in the web of plurality.

In some traditions of educational thought and practice, particularly those originating in the German-speaking world, the connection between education and the question of human freedom, of existing as subject, is quite obvious (see, for example, Gössling 1993). In other traditions, particularly those originating in the English-speaking world, this connection is less obvious and not really central to the self-understanding of the field (see Biesta 2011). That is why, in an educational universe in which English has become the *lingua franca*, the connection with the question of freedom is easily forgotten in attempts to make education 'work,'

even if such attempts flow from laudable intentions such as empowerment or social justice. The danger is that such intentions, particularly when 'translated' through the logic of GEMI, the Global Education Measurement Industry (Biesta 2015), put education on an instrumentalist path obsessed with 'outcomes' and, in the process, turn the student from a subject of action into an object of intervention.

In this regard, the Manifesto also sought to speak 'for' education as it tried to highlight that the question of the subject is the 'business' of education, even –or particularly– when this is 'risky' business (Biesta 2014), that is, the very 'business' that escapes control. One point implied in the Manifesto is that when education becomes envisaged and enacted as control, the subject drops out, it disappears from sight. This is not only the case when education becomes obsessed with the production of measurable learning outcomes or with strong forms of socialisation that seek to define, beforehand, what kind of individual the child or student is to become. It is also the case when the subject –or the subject-ness of the subject– becomes entangled with all kinds of 'psycho-technics,' such as programmes aimed at the development of particular personal qualities and characteristics or the more general ambition of education as character building. Although at first sight they seem to be interested in the individual as subject, or the subject as individual, they keep ending up reducing the subject to an object that needs some form of *cultivation*.

Some of the rather strange concepts and formulations in the Manifesto –such as the idea of dissensus and the suggestion of education in the tension between 'what is' and 'what is not'– were all meant to identify the unique 'space' for and the unique concern of education, a concern that cannot be reduced to or be translated into the concerns of, for example, psychology or sociology, but need to be seen as properly educational. This is why education is neither about individual development nor about collective socialisation, neither about individual expression nor about social or societal limitation, but about the encounter of individuals with their freedom –the freedom to say yes or no, to stay or walk away, to go with the flow or offer resistance– and with the ongoing, lifelong challenge to bring their freedom into dialogue with the world, natural and social, in such a way, to refer

to Arendt one more time, that my capacity to take initiative does not destroy the opportunities for others to take initiative, to bring their beginnings into the world as well. Education, as Winfred Böhm (2017) has put it so well, therefore has its ‘natural’ place in the world –the (Arendtian) world of plurality and difference, of existing-in-plurality-and-difference. He writes (in my translation from the original German): “While the human being as a natural being develops and while the human being as social role player is being socialised, his education as subject always takes place against the horizon of the world.” (Böhm 2017:163)

Did the Manifesto, as a beginning, lead to anything? Did it leave traces during the (first) decade of its existence? This is difficult to say. There are traces on the world wide web and in writings where the Manifesto has been cited, referred to or discussed, and there is evidence –as with this publication– that this discussion is still going on. Whether the Manifesto is to be credited for this is, again, difficult to say, but what is clear is that the concerns that the Manifesto sought to express are real and ongoing concerns, concerns ‘worth fighting for,’ as the saying goes, as long as we bear in mind that ‘fighting’ is perhaps too strong a notion in a world characterised by tension and conflict. At least the Manifesto expresses concerns that are still important to be concerned about, in all the places where the promise is being kept alive of education as something more than an instrument for control but as a place where we

can encounter our freedom and the responsibility that comes with utilising that freedom in our ongoing attempts at existing-together-as-subjects.

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