

A Manifesto for Education

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Untitled, sculpture. Gabriela López

Abstract

In November 2010 the authors finished the writing of a manifesto for education. The manifesto was an attempt to respond to a number of issues concerning education, both in the field of educational research and in the wider socio-political environment. This is the text of that manifesto followed by two commentaries in which the authors try to highlight some of the reasons that have led to the writing of the manifesto, and in which an attempt is made to situate the manifesto in a number of discussions and debates.

Keywords: education; educational investigation; democracy; resistance; fight

Un manifiesto por la educación

Resumen

En noviembre de 2010 los autores terminaron de escribir un manifiesto por la educación. El manifiesto constituyó un intento de responder a un número de asuntos que conciernen a la educación, tanto en el campo de la investigación educativa como en el medio socio-político más amplio. Este es el texto de aquel manifiesto, seguido por dos comentarios en los cuales los autores intentan resaltar algunas de las razones que llevaron a la escritura del manifiesto, y en los cuales se intenta situar al manifiesto en un número de discusiones y debates.

Palabras clave: educación; investigación educativa; democracia; resistencia; lucha

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 reducing them either 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

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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 of how much education is still possible in our educational institutions.

The Interest for 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 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.

Education in the Tension between 'What is' and 'What is Not'

Rather than thinking of education in temporal terms – that is, as having to do with the *tensión* 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 'atemporal' 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 attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, 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 rather a matter of not saddling education with unattainable hopes that defer freedom rather than making 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.

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.

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 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 towards ‘what is’ rather than promoting 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.

Theorising Education Educationally

The challenge is to develop forms of theory and theorising that have freedom as their in-

terest 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’. Rather, their resources are ethical, political and aesthetic 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 commonsense is transformed by assuming equality in a situation of inequality.

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 opening 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.

A Manifesto for Education?

Gert Biesta

In our times a manifesto can only be performed in an ironic manner. We know all too well, after all, that no manifesto that has ever been written –be it in the domain of art or in the domain of politics– has ever managed to change the world. So while a manifesto speaks with a high ambition, often one where the ambition is that the manifesto speaks for itself,

the ambition should not be to dictate what should happen or what should no longer happen. As an ironic form –or as an ironic performance– a manifesto can be nothing more than an attempt to speak and, through this, create an opening, a moment of interruption. That is precisely what this manifesto tries to do and what we try to do with this manifesto. We try to speak, not simply about education, but also for education.

Such speech is not entirely easy because it requires a double gesture. The point is that if it was perfectly clear what education ‘is’ and what it is ‘about’, then it would be quite easy to speak for education, as most of the work had already been done by ‘education’ itself. In a sense, there would hardly be a need to speak for education. The challenge, therefore, is not only to speak about, for, or in the name of education, it is, at the very same time, to say something about the referent we are trying to speak about, for, and in the name of.

One way in which this might be done is through definition –that is, by suggesting a definition of what education ‘is’ or ought to be and then constructing the rest of the argument from there.

Maybe that is what we are doing as well in the manifesto, although by tying up education with the articulate the educational interest as an interest in something that also cannot be pinned down, that cannot be captured, and that, in that sense, also cannot be defined. More positively, we are trying to indicate that a number of ways of speaking and doing and thinking about education that are circulating in contemporary discussions about education, both in society at large and in the field of educational research, run the risk of keeping out or eradicating the very thing that might matter educationally.

This is what we see happening in both populism and idealism. Both strategies seem to miss something that matters educationally –or, to put it in more careful terms, that might matter educationally and that, so we believe, should matter educationally. While populism expects too little from education –and thus can blame those who expect a little more, those who complicate education– idealism expects too much from education –and thus can blame those who expect too little from it, those who tie education too quickly to the ex-

isting state of affairs. ‘Freedom’ then signifies an ‘excess’; that is, it signifies what cannot be captured if one is either a serious populist or a serious idealist, but may matter nonetheless, and may matter educationally.

Perhaps as an aside, the difficulty with the word ‘education’ is that it can refer to many different things and actually does refer to many different things. (And that’s only in the English language, because if we go to other languages, such as German, we find a much bigger array of concepts, such as *Erziehung*, *Bildung*, *Ausbildung*, and so on.) We are not trying to cover all of that.

We are not trying to say that schools should only be about freedom, for example, or that vocational education should not be called education. But we are trying to ask how much education is possible or can occur in schools, how much education is possible or can occur in vocational training –and, in a sense, we are trying to indicate why it might be important to be able to ask that question, why it might be a meaningful and important question, particularly here and now, when we see that education is under attack for not delivering what it is supposed to deliver (and perhaps at the same time for delivering what, from the angle of populism or idealism, it is not supposed to deliver).

The idea of freedom is not a foreign concept in the field of education. We can find many references to it throughout the history of educational thought and educational practice. We can hear its echo in such notions as emancipation, enlightenment and liberal education, and we can find its promise in critical education, empowering education, and so on. While in this regard freedom may have the power to keep education away from what is, from the reality of the here and now, and keeps the possibility of excess or transcendence open, there is a danger that in such notions as emancipation, enlightenment, liberation and empowerment freedom is always projected into the future, as something that needs time, as something that may arrive, but that is always to arrive later. As we suggest in the manifesto, there is a strong tendency to think of education entirely in such temporal terms, both with regard to what it is supposed to deliver –a future state of liberation, a future state of enlightenment– and with regard to its object –the child as the ‘not yet’.

Could it be, therefore, that we need to take temporality out of education in order to capture something educationally, something that is neither about what is, nor about what is not yet (but will come one day)?

If we take freedom seriously –as something that can happen right here and right now– then perhaps the educational moment, the educational event arises out of the confrontation between what is and what is not; right here and right now. This confrontation which, after Rancière but not identical with Rancière, we refer to as dissensus, is the moment where speech –as different from repetition– might happen. It is not the moment where existing identity positions are picked up through repetition (not even if the repetition is not entirely perfect, as slippage is not automatically speech), nor is it about the future promise of speech. It rather is about what is spoken here and now, right in front of us. This, as we try to argue, is not to take history out of education, but rather to take history seriously, to believe that history can be made because history is not the unfolding of a programme, but a chain of events.

What is there in the manifesto is therefore not only an attempt to speak for education, and also not just an attempt to articulate the referent we are speaking for, it is perhaps also a theory of education, a theory that first of all aims to construct an educational 'object'. This is important as well, because if there is no educational way of speaking about education, if there is no educational way to theorise education, then the only resources left are ones that are borrowed from somewhere else. In the field of educational theory and educational research such resources are often borrowed from other academic disciplines, thus constructing the sociology of education, the psychology of education, the philosophy of education, the history of education, the economics of education, and so on. These resources can make important things visible and can do important work. But the question that needs to be asked again –just as we try to ask this question in relation to educational practices– is whether such theoretical resources can capture the educational dimension of education. We have some doubts, but the most important thing for



Calm woman music, sculpture. Gabriela López

us is to see if it can become possible to make this into a meaningful question: To what extent can the sociology, psychology, philosophy, history etcetera of education capture what is educational about education?

As mentioned, the manifesto is an attempt to speak –to speak for education. In a sense, this is something that can only be done, not something that can be explained. In that sense this commentary is as much an attempt to speak for education as the manifesto is. It is therefore as much a manifesto as the manifesto it tries to make plausible. There is, therefore, no invitation to sign up to the manifesto. The manifesto rather invites people to start speaking for education themselves. It is, in sum, a manifesto that calls for multiplication, not for copying.

A Manifesto for Education!

Carl Anders Säfström

Modern education has been associated with the development of the modern welfare state. The early pragmatists of the North American melting pot already saw education as a springboard to a new and better society. Technology was to become the driving force while education was to top reprepare the ground for such a new society (Feinberg, 1975). The values and norms through which this brave new world would form itself were based on the power of technology to make human living smoother and more effective in achieving its aspirations. In research, large-scale projects were carried out and new methods were developed in order to deal with large quantities of data.

The rationale behind this was the need to both construct and control the emergence of a new type of citizen, the modern democratic ‘man’. The Second World War had shown the need for this new ‘man’, distinct from Fascists and Nazis (Herrman, 1995). Social science, informed by the new technologies of the modern world, developed rapidly with financial support from military budgets (Herrman, 1995). In Sweden the emerging social sciences, among them education, turned to the USA to learn the new methods for dealing with large-scale data sets in order to carry out the dual task of inventing and controlling the new democrat, suitable for the new welfare state to come (Säfström, 2004).

Why this short historical introduction? It is necessary in order to have a context for understanding what we face in education in Sweden today. The key insight is that education forms itself in the modern state as part of the state’s dealing with its internal problems and desires. That is how it constructs its citizens in order to survive as a state of a particular kind (Popkewitz, 2008).

Education, in other words, both as an idea and in the form of a particular school system, does not lie outside the construction of the modern welfare state, but is its very foundation. From this, two things follow. First, if education is under attack, it means that the whole idea of a particular kind of welfare state is under attack. That this is the case is shown quite clearly in Sweden today, when compulsory schooling, an ideal that has formed school politics since at least the 1940s, is no longer in the interest of all, but when families are choosing schools according to their social status and wealth (Englund, 2010). The state funds what is called ‘free schools’, which follow a national curriculum but are privately owned companies funded with tax money, in effect turning tax into private profit. Newspapers report that starting a school is the most profitable business in Sweden, with the lowest risk and the highest return. For example, the national newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (29/09/2010) reported an average profit of 13 % for private schools and the care professions, in comparison with 9% for all other types of businesses, while *Svenska Dagbladet* (7/8/2010) reported on a large increase in risk capitalists operating in the free school market because of the fact that it gives high returns for small investments.

The former idea of education –a school for all understood in terms of democracy, solidarity and justice– has been renamed by liberal and conservative school politics ‘flum’ (in English, ‘fluff’). This renaming, which has gained quite a wide acceptance in the public domain, is part of a discursive shift in the discourse about education and schooling in Sweden, where ‘discipline’ and ‘order’ have become key terms, rather than democracy (Månsson & Säfström, 2010). To be more precise, the ‘school for all’ has been renamed ‘for all to join’, and ‘lifelong learning in the knowledge society’. This is a distinctly different discourse characterised by a return to ‘positivistic’ knowledge produced by brain

research, evidence-based research, positivistic psychology, and leadership and efficiency ideas in all matters concerning schooling.

Second, it also follows that if educational research is internal to a particular kind of welfare state that is being challenged to its core by political forces from the right –both liberals and conservatives– then it means that educational research is also under attack. All types of research that is orientated towards something outside of itself (e.g. an orientation towards justice, solidarity, democracy, or freedom) are questioned. That is, research becomes reduced to more research for the sake of research to be used by politicians defining to what end it will lead (Biesta, 2010).

In Sweden this means in effect that a new right redefines the whole idea of a welfare state from within by changing the whole educational infrastructure. This involves changing the school law and the grading system in school; it involves giving teachers the right to punish students; it involves changing the admission criteria for the gymnasium (high school) and for the university; it involves changing the terms upon which educational research is funded; it involves changing teacher education and who has the right to give teacher education diplomas; it involves implementing a new ‘quality’ system for universities; and much more –it involves changing the totality of the educational landscape, from kindergarten to higher education.

The irony of it all is that in order for such fundamental change to take place, the right-wing coalition parties need to attack educational research forcefully, since a large part of educational research in Sweden has been conducted within the larger idea of a ‘social democratic’ welfare state (Rosengren & Öhngren, 1997). Or rather, the state needs to redefine educational research so as to better suit its own aspirations. This is done most blatantly by promoting brain research and an old form of positivistic educational psychology (Säfström, 2011). The state thus supports types of research that only with great difficulty can say anything substantial at all about education, and that too easily can be accused of only legitimising an already politically decided view on what education is and what it should be good for. Its lack of scientific credibility (and this is particularly ironic, since the Ministry of Education claims

it is doing all this in order to increase the quality of research) is counteracted by rigid and aggressive propaganda, supported by one of the bigger daily papers in

Sweden, Dagens Nyheter (see Wiklund, 2006), in effect turning school politics into pure populism and disgracefully and illegitimately criticising solid mainstream educational research for failing to live up to some kind of ‘quality’ standard. One should remember, though, that in this critique it is not educational research per se that is the target; rather, it is a particular ‘social democratic’ welfare state that is under attack.

And here I come to the heart of the matter. Educational research forms itself too easily in relation to the politics of the day rather than in relation to traditions of thought that are older than the span of the ruling parties. Educational research too easily becomes reduced to the application of ideas coming from elsewhere, be it politics or other disciplines. This makes education weak in relation to ideological attacks such as the ones described above, and confuses the field to its core.

Educational researchers carrying out solid educational research, both mainstream and ‘critical’, did not foresee what was coming, and when this frontal attack on everything they held sacred came, there was simply no response possible. Or, to be more precise, the possible response just seemed to confirm what the new right was saying –namely, that educational research only was backing up an outdated welfare state in its own ‘leftist’ interest. The few responses from the research field just dug themselves deeper into the dirt.

What complicates the issue even more is that the field of educational research in Sweden is also under attack from within. Other disciplines enter into education through subject didactics, yet often without doing their homework, without bothering to trace theories of education through their intellectual history and without relating themselves to what actually has been done and currently is being done in the field of education, nationally and internationally. This expansion of ‘educational’ research in the universities, mainly through teacher education, in effect diffuses the field even more. Education has been severely marginalised as an intellectual tradition in its own right, and new inventions are constantly made

in order to meet the demands of a confused field and determined policymakers alike. The inventions are called, for example, subject didactics, educational work, educational sociology, special education, educational psychology, and are established as their own disciplines, but often with the same content, only named differently at different universities, and all of them supposedly distinctively different from education (in Swedish, *Pedagogik*), confusing students and staff on all levels. In one respect, though, the diffused field is kept together today by the ambitions of the state not only to support a particular kind of research, but actually to define what that research is to explain, how it will explain it, and what theory it will use to establish these explanations as the truth (for further details, see Säfström, 2010). But is that what we want education to mean? I strongly believe it is not. It is time to stand up for education!

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Notes

The authors would be pleased to publish responses to this text (no more than 500 words).

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