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Raising a child is madness: learning in encounter and foundations of education

Abstract

This paper presentation will elaborate on two important foundations of education: (a) Education is directed towards freedom and righteousness: education is aiming at letting children become free persons who contribute to a righteous world; and (b) One cannot be an individual without the other: by education a child becomes him/herself only by letting the life of others be part of his/her own life. These two foundations are taken to the foreground, as a particular choice out of 11 foundations of education presented in my just published book: *Opvoeden is gekkenwerk – 11 uitgangspunten*. The paper shows the theological and pedagogical/educational consequences of these foundations in the light of *Learning in Encounter* and aims at a fruitful discussion on basic interests and ideals for nowadays education worldwide.



1. Introduction

Under the heading of the main theme *Learning in Encounter*, two of the main questions of this year's conference are: (a) how do we deal with differences, and (b) which theological, educational, and philosophical foundations should our learning be based on? Learning in encounter and to learn from differences are at the very heart of my just published (in Dutch) book: *Opvoeden is gekkenwerk – 11 uitgangspunten*. In English, this reads: *Raising a child is madness – 11 foundations*.¹ On the basis of 11 foundations, the book, from my academic, professional and personal point of view, reflects on important ideals and interests for bringing up a new generation nowadays and in the near future. These 11 foundations have both theological, educational and philosophical underpinnings and, as said, learning in encounter and learning from differences are more than once at the very heart of it. *Opvoeden is gekkenwerk* was written for parents, teachers, pedagogues, social workers and anyone else who is (professionally or personally) involved in upbringing a next generation.

The book is to be considered as a valorisation project of insights derived from three sources of reflection. In the first place a reflection on outcomes of my practical theological research on religious education and youth ministry practices. In the second place a reflection on what I as a religious educator at the Protestant Theological University in The Netherlands, implicitly or explicitly communicate when it comes to foundations of 'good' (religious) education. In the third place a reflection on my own practices as father in my own family and being a foster family for children and teenagers in vulnerable situations. I am convinced that all these reflections also borrow from insights derived from debates, interactions and research within international networks in my work, among which the Religious Education Association is an important one. Given the main theme of the 2017 REA conference, I would like to focus in this paper on two particular foundations: (a) Education is directed towards freedom and righteousness: education is aiming at letting children become free persons who contribute to a righteous world; (b) One cannot be an individual without the other: by education a child becomes him/herself only by letting the life of others be part of his/her own life. These are respectively the second and third foundation in the row of 11 foundations in the book; the total list of 11 foundations is included in the Appendix.

With this paper I would like to bring back the content of the book (the book is in fact to be considered as a valorisation project) into the academic and professional debate among religious educators, by focusing on learning in encounter with the other who is different. Section 2 summarizes the foundation *Education is directed towards freedom and right*: two important ideals (freedom and right(eousness)) in this very encounter with the other who is different. Section 3 discusses the foundation *One cannot be an individual without the other*. Section 4 focuses on four theological and educational/pedagogical consequences springing from these two foundations in the context of *learning in encounter*. This paper ends up in section 5 with a conclusion. The intended contribution of the paper as a whole is an initiation of a fruitful discussion on foundations of education in the nowadays context worldwide and showing chances for further reflection and research.

¹ De Kock, A. (2017). *Opvoeden is gekkenwerk. 11 uitgangspunten*. [Raising a Child is Madness. 11 foundations]. Heerenveen (The Netherlands): Royal Jongbloed.

2. Education is directed towards freedom and right(eousness)

Education is directed towards freedom and righteousness: two important ideals, not only in education but also in the encounter with the other who is different. To be short: for me, freedom is related to leave things behind, to disconnect with what binds you, to go for the unknown, the unexpected. Right is related to be known, to be safe, to live without fear.

At first sight, the words freedom and right sound quite judicial. And sometimes the upbringing of children is judicial: full of rules and legislations: you must eat your vegetables first; you shouldn't hit your little brother; you may request the teacher for help but not before you gave it a try yourself; etcetera. Educators are good legislators and connect their do's and don'ts with a variety of penalties. Sometimes parents and teachers give praise for following the rules. But most often they punish if expectations are not met.

But... when it comes to the words freedom and right I do not hint on a state of being which is ruled by legislations, rules and restrictions from outside. I connect these words in the first place with a state of being which comes from inside: a result out of the own heart of the child, a result of its own sense of purpose. The ideal of freedom, thus, means: to support children towards living a life lived from the own heart and not just from expectations from others.

The ideal of right means then: to support children towards living a life in which the other's safety and security is of as much as worth as your own safety and security. The combined ideal of freedom and right asks for the development of the will: the will to not play off the heart of the other against your own heart.

The ideal of a righteous world is in fact the compass for the development of the child towards a free person. The ideal of freedom is not directed towards the "I", neither is it unfocused. It is directed towards the "we". Freedom also means obligations and responsibilities. Freedom has nothing to do with limitlessness. It has to do, instead, with not being locked up; with not bound to the expectations of others. Education is an attempt to support the child's development in such a way that the child is not raising the heart of others against its own heart.

At the same time, education defies right(eousness). There is a simple reason for this: without righteousness, freedom becomes banal. And the other way around: without freedom, justice becomes cold.

Righteousness, justice is in a way connected with mercy. Righteousness does not only mean to apply rules in a sufficient way. It has also to do with *not* applying the rules: to give a new chance to someone. This is mercy. You do justice to something or to someone. To trigger this awareness of doing justice to the situation is part of the strive for righteousness in education. It results in relativizing yourself and showing mercy towards others.

And for freedom is true: it has to do both with not be bound and with to let you bind. To disconnect with what binds you results in new connections with other possibilities, persons or expectations. To be free does not mean to be strictly unbound. To be free means to commit yourself to an ideal you confront or challenge yourself with, a purpose you show yourself or a responsibility you yourself takes.

Educators who direct their upbringing towards freedom, also in a way are focussed on liberation of the child. To liberate a child from negative feelings or thoughts about itself. To liberate children from evil powers forcing them: unrealistic expectations from friends, bad habits or addictions. Thus, education is directed towards freedom and righteousness: education is aiming at letting children become free persons who contribute to a righteous world.

3. One cannot be an individual without the other

If someone looks in the photo album of her child she will observe a lot of others near the boy or girl who play a significant role in the development and the identity of the child. Who is the child who has been left if all these others would leave from the pictures? Raising the child, parents wish the child will develop itself as an individual. But precisely this, to be an individual, cannot be without others. In other words: Without others you cannot become yourself and be yourself. Who you are as an individual depends on others with whom you are in a relationship. Not only relationships with others in the present but also relationships with others in the past make who you are: your roots, so to say, your forefathers/mothers, the locality and subculture in which they lived, their friends and connections, etcetera.

It is difficult to speak about yourself without speaking about others. Though, in how is written and spoken about upbringing nowadays we observe more than once “the individual without the others”: “*To grow up means to discover who you are as a unique human being*”; “*In the end, education’s aim is the child being able to be authentic*”. The message under the surface of these kinds of posts is that the child brought up should not be dependent on others or even be influenced by others. Not seldom, this slips into high rates of individualism in educational ideals. As a counterreaction, numbers of pedagogues, teachers and politicians are pleading for a more relational approach of the individual and, as a consequence, a more relational approach in education, whether in schools or in the home. The most important prerequisite for such an approach is education giving space, also in a literal sense, to share life with others; to provide opportunities to the child to let the lives of others be part of the life of itself. In a practical sense, this has two consequences for education: (1) educators should support children to meet other children; (2) The development of the individual as human being goes beyond parents’ power: “it takes a village to raise a child”.

To let others’ life be part of your own life is not a passive thing but something active: it demands a conscious choice. A conscious choice to share life with e.g. children who are overlooked, or are at the edge of communities or society. Through these encounters, the child becomes more human and the other becomes more human.

It works both ways. As a father or mother, you wish your child will blossom, but at the same time, you do not want to nip in the bud the blossoming of other children, because of your own child. You want to give chances to your own child, and at the same time, not to prevent chances for other children. This brings us to the second consequence: *It takes a village to raise a child*. The education of children is not restricted to the influence of parents and some teachers. There are a lot of actors and factors surrounding them that impact the life of children. The best parent can do is to make use of this simple fact in a constructive way: to allow the life of others be present in that of your child is an enrichment of the upbringing. It increases chances for development and correction.

At the same time, sharing your life with others is not without risk. A child might lose itself in the contact with others: a child can pull out all the stops in order to belong to some group, without being really comfortable with it. The teenager plays her role strictly according to the expectations of peers. The boy plays the game but at the same time he is a lost man.

The risk in education is not only in terms of young people turning over to group pressure or idealistic images in popular adverts. Also when it comes to the relationship between educator and child there is a risk of children losing themselves, e.g. the child who is totally focussed on meeting the expectations of parents in all kind of ways; In the end, this might lead to grown up

adults who are not able to speak out freely about their own inner voices, own ideals and own ideas.

4. Theological and educational/pedagogical consequences

Now I will focus on some theological and educational/pedagogical consequences springing from these two foundations of education in the context of *learning in encounter*. I cluster these into four main themes of reflection for educators involved in *Learning in Encounter*: (A) Goals, (B) Identity, (C) Authority, and (D) Safety.

A. Goals

The ideals of freedom and right(eousness) are steering, consciously or more implicit, the goals educational environments are striving for: at home, in the classroom or anywhere else. To develop the will of the child not to play off the heart of the other against your own can also function as a goal. The same is true for ‘liberating the child’ or to teach children the ability and the motivation to share their lives with others. All these kinds of goals are or at least can be both pedagogical/educational loaded and theological loaded. What is the goal, from a theological and/or from a pedagogical perspective of *learning in encounter*?

Thus, a main question for education which deals with *learning in encounter with the other who is different* is: is there any important goal involved which steers the educational learning process or the process of upbringing the child? And if so, what is that goal? Is the goal “just” to be in contact, or is it the child to be liberated or to become free, is it to develop the will and motivation, etcetera. Or in more conceptual terms: is the goal cognitive or more affective oriented, is it social oriented, or is the goal more directed towards experiences and emotions?²

B. Identity

The next main theme of reflection is the theme of identity. Here are some examples from the description of the two foundations above that illustrate this theme: “freedom is to disconnect with what binds you; “the child should not be bound to expectations from outside”; “the child should develop an authentic self”. But the following ones are also examples: “without others the child cannot become himself” “we should have a relational perspective on the self”.

Who is the child? Who/what is the ‘self’? How should we perceive the individual in its relationships? These are questions about identity and how educators perceive identity. In educational settings one is involved in identity forming processes. And in these settings a view on or an idea of identity is functioning, consciously or more implicit. Is the child to be conceived as part of a group, a community and is education, as a consequence, directed towards socializing the child into an existing community? Or, in contrast, is the child to be conceived as an individual who should develop a unique, authentic self with independent outlooks and is education, as a consequence, directed towards supporting the child’s individualisation? And the concept of *learning in encounter* opens at least one more view on the theme of identity: is education directed towards supporting encounters with others so that new communities develop with new, creative stances in life and thus creating new kinds of identities?

² See De Kock, A. (2015). What about *learning* in practical theological studies? Toward more conceptual clarity. *SAGE Open*, 5(2), DOI: 10.1177/2158244015592682

Thus, a second main question for education which deals with *learning in encounter with the other who is different* is: from what conception of identity do we arrange the educational context?³ Different views of identity can, again, be both pedagogical/educational loaded and theological loaded. Who is the child, from a theological and/or from a pedagogical perspective and what does that mean for why and how we are *learning in encounter*?

C. Authority

In the description of the two foundations of education the theme of authority is hinted on: what or who is authoritative when it comes to your decisions in life: the rules that are given in a society or in a local community, coming ‘from outside’; or the inner voice coming ‘from within’ from the own heart, so to say. And how fixed is authority? Are there moments to relativize yourself or the rule to make way to show mercy? Authority is a third main theme of reflection in educational settings directed towards *learning in encounter with the other who is different*. Authority is also an important theological and pedagogical/educational loaded factor in contexts of religious education.⁴

The encounter with the one who is different might challenge authority structures that the child is used to. The conscious choice to share life with the other who is different is a conscious choice to open possibilities, by way of authority located in the other, to critique the own voice and own views, to correct the own opinion and to develop the own identity further.

D. Safety

Learning in encounter with the other who is different is not without risk. A child might lose itself in the contact with others: a child can pull out all the stops in order to belong to some group, without being really comfortable with it. And also in the relationship between educator and child there is a risk of children losing themselves, being totally focussed on meeting the expectations of educators in all kind of ways. The encounter with the other who is different, whether it is a peer or an educator, thus asks for a safe atmosphere in which the child’s integrity is safeguarded and where the child is not forced to lose itself unwanted. Education directed towards the encounter with the other who is different should reflect on the issue of integrity: how do we safeguard it, where do we define limits (if at all / if needed) in challenging children to “lose” parts of themselves.

5. Conclusion

With this paper I brought back the content of *Opvoeden is gekkenwerk – 11 uitgangspunten* into the academic and professional debate among religious educators, by focusing on learning in encounter with the other who is different. The intended contribution is an initiation of a fruitful discussion on foundations of education in the nowadays context worldwide and showing chances for further reflection and research. I found out that there are at least four main themes of reflection for educators involved in *Learning in Encounter*: (A) Goals, (B) Identity, (C) Authority, and (D) Safety

³ Ibid. In the article three conceptions of identity are discussed: an intra-, inter-, and suprapersonal conception,

⁴ See again De Kock, A. (2015). What about *learning* in practical theological studies? Toward more conceptual clarity. *SAGE Open*, 5(2), DOI: 10.1177/2158244015592682: a division is discussed between external, internal and distributed forms of authority.

Answers to the question how do we deal with differences in classrooms, in families, in (religious) communities, etc., should be searched for in reflecting on each of these themes: what is the main goal in the learning situation, what kind of identity do we strive for, who or what has authority and what are the limits when it comes to a safe atmosphere. These four themes, goals – identity – authority – and safety – should be at the core of the process of the development of learning environments by educators who wish to promote the encounter with the other who is different. This development process is both a theological, and pedagogical/educational endeavour: it asks from educators to be theologically and pedagogically sensitive, listening carefully to children, to themselves and to the respective communities in which they are rooted.

Bibliography

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Appendix: 11 foundations of (good) education⁵

1. Upbringing is a lot of hassle; we just go with the flow.
2. Education is directed towards freedom and righteousness: education is aiming at letting children become free persons who contribute to a righteous world.
3. One cannot be an individual without the other: by education a child becomes him/herself only by letting the life of others be part of his/her own life.
4. Education is not ‘screaming on the sidelines’. An educator shows what is true, worth, and what gives meaning in life in the midst of the playing field.
5. Education is a playground. Children and educators are playing together in a reality which is bigger than they themselves are.
6. Education is not endless, if was it a river without banks. To let life flow you need the bank of the given community (your roots) on the one side and the bank of new adventures (your longings) on the other.
7. Love before anything else: a safe nest is not the endpoint of education; to enter the world with love is the next station.
8. Education shakes things loose. Children are not growing by knowledge of the status quo but by possibilities to make something good in life
9. Raising a child takes your life. The child is not helped with an educator who stays close to himself but, instead, is helped by an educator who offers himself to the child’s life.
10. Education is directed towards teaching a good walk of life: to be peaceful, benevolent, and to be reasoned with. The usefulness of knowlde and skills stands or falls with this walk.
11. Upbringing is a lot of mercy; we just start all over again and again and again.

⁵ Translated from the original Dutch list on pages 9-10 in De Kock, A. (2017). Opvoeden is gekkenwerk. 11 uitgangspunten. [Raising a Child is Madness. 11 foundations]. Heerenveen (The Netherlands): Royal Jongbloed.