

**My talk on “Working with Hannah Arendt”, on invitation by the International Network on Hannah Arendt and Education, March 16, 2023, 3-5 CET, hosts Morten Korsgaard and Pia Rojahn**

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Thank you for asking me, and thank you all for joining us in this session. I am aware that we come from different parts of the world, and it's great to know that we are all interested in, and inspired by Hannah Arendt. For some by the way it is *A-rendt*, for others though *A-rendt*.

I have cut up my talk in five parts: (1) first I'll introduce myself, (2) then I will relate how I met Arendt, (3) then some history about my own education, and the way it has formed me, (4) then I'll talk about how I work with Arendt, and (5) lastly to some conclusions and questions.

So first:

**1. Introduction of me**, born 1954 in The Hague, the Netherlands - up to my pension now 5 years ago I worked in different jobs: as a teacher in primary and secondary education, civil servant at the municipal and national level, educational consultant, and in the last 11 years of my salaried active life I worked as an assistant professor at the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, where I trained and educated new generations of teachers and social workers, both on the BA and MA levels. I also did research in Rotterdam, part empirical, part phenomenological, part conceptual. I published quite a lot, not only on Arendt, but also on John Dewey, on Janusz Korczak, the Polish educator and children's rights founder, on subjects like play, and research methodology, and last but not least about my fellow countryman, the philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven. If you like you can take a look at my website which has an English page, besides pages in Dutch of course. ..

**2. How I met Hannah Arendt** – In 2002 my friend and colleague Wouter Pols and myself started the preparation of what would become a major textbook in teacher training and education – called *Schoolpedagogiek* which in English would be something like School Pedagogy; pedagogy not so much in the didactic sense but in the sense of the German *Pädagogik*, or French *pédagogie*. The book presents many points of view and theories from different quarters: not only classic continental *Pädagogik*, but also phenomenology, psychoanalysis, educational theory, psychology, ethics etc., and the general idea is that students start with cases from the present and the past and use these theories to interpret them, and by working with these theories learn to conceptualize, and develop their own professional personal practice-theory. The first edition appeared in 2006, the fifth reworked in 2023.

We put together our resources, mine being among others Dewey, and Korczak and Wouter's among many others a thinker called Hannah Arendt, of whom I had not heard at this point in time.

He advised that I read *The crisis in education*, I did and this really threw me into shock. I'll come back to what this text means to me, up to the present day, but for now I just want to put in mind what a text, if it is a great text, actually does with a reader, it can really blow him or her off their feet, and with the *Crisis* Arendt did this. Perhaps you have a comparable experience with a text. And to the present day I think that the *Crisis* essay contains the most beautiful, and I really mean this in an aesthetic sense, phrases ever written about education

and upbringing. And probably some of the most important. They have found their way into our textbook and into many more publications.

So when I read *Crisis*, I wanted to read more of Arendt, and to make this part of the story short rather than long: in the end I read everything that has appeared of her in print, and some more in the famous online archives at the Library of Congress. Her work has become, and is, almost on a daily basis, a source of inspiration, of wonder, and of awe to me, and I feel very lucky that my friend, now 20 years ago, suggested that I should read this little paper.... It has been my experience that when I read parts of the *Crisis* with an audience, sometimes you can hear the needle drop to the floor. The phrases in the last pages, you all know them of course, about – yes: about what it means to be an educator not only for children, but also in and for the world, are to my mind pure poetry. And as you know, Arendt did write poetry... which by the way will be the subject of a new essay by Hanke Drop from Utrecht University and myself.

Reading Arendt's *Crisis* I was confronted with a view of education that on the one hand sounded familiar in a way, but I couldn't pinpoint what it was, and on the other it was totally new, shocking even, disturbing; when I look back upon it now, I must say that the text interrupted me. I want to go a little deeper into that now, because it illustrates how we as pedagogues, and thinkers in a way are shaped by what we encounter, what we embrace or what we reject, or what we may come back to after many years.

### **3. My framework of pedagogy until I encountered Arendts work.**

Starts with my own upbringing which was religious, more specific roman-catholic – I went to a catholic primary school, catholic secondary school, catholic teacher training, worked at first at a catholic primary school.

In the Netherlands this stands for the so-called *verzuiling* – pillarization. Catholics, Protestants, and non-theists until well into the 1950s had their own newspapers, broadcasting companies, sports associations, and schools and universities. It has greatly influenced my generation, born in the 1950s. It was probably the last generation, because at the end of the 1960s this was over – although not completely. There are certainly still pillars in the Netherlands, even very strong ones, also in the school system, including new ones such as Islamic schools.

The education at my teacher training was still a religious, normative pedagogy, but, and this is important: it was also the pedagogy of everyday experience, of phenomenology and of a strong link between education and culture. It might be good to specifically mention the name of Langeveld here, a very prominent Dutch pedagogue and phenomenologist who not only very was influential in the Netherlands, but also in Germany. It is important to keep this in mind because in the Netherlands we are today in a completely different situation where pedagogy is concerned. I suppose if you mention Langeveld now, many educators and students of today will say: Lange-who? There was a time when he and Dutch pedagogy were almost synonymous. And just to give one example of what he wrote about education and the world: I quote: "School is a transitional stage – both a defence against the adult world and a preparation of the students for the world", and also: "Our schools are schools of a humankind that has lost its certainties", and "The world is what it is and not what we would like it to be". This is from 1960 (1967) and it might have written by Arendt. And in fact it is what I

rediscovered when I studied Arendt: the phenomenological, culture-oriented view of education. Without knowing it, but I'm not sure about that, Arendt wrote herself into one of the most distinguished schools of continental pedagogy.

Right in my first year as a teacher I went on to study philosophy of education in evening and weekend courses, and I was lucky enough to be well educated in existential philosophy, as well as in didactics, and in educational psychology. In later years, while studying for my MA, I encountered a large number of thinkers in the fields of education, philosophy, ethics, and educational psychology. Never Arendt, but mid-80s there was Dewey.

And this marks an important step for me in my development as an educator and as a philosopher of education, not only because I would get a PhD on Dewey some years later, but also because Dewey, with his pragmatic philosophy and pedagogy, shed a completely different light on issues of upbringing and education, and their relation to society. My previous ideas were, and completely in the spirit of Dewey, shaken up and I had to redesign them, it felt like a reconstruction.

Because naturally I soon came, through *Democracy & Education*, and many other essays, upon Dewey's ideas of the connection between school and society, his philosophy of action, his interest in what he calls the "psychological and sociological factors", between which will have to be mediated, which is the prime task of education. I thoroughly immersed myself in his philosophy, and pedagogy, and studied the debates Dewey was involved in around 1900 with various philosophical and pedagogical currents of his time: such as the Herbartians, the Froebelians, etc. I supported his idea that the school is, or can be the engine of social progress, of improving socio-economic conditions and I also endorsed his vision of education for citizenship.

At the same time, something was gnawing: is it so unequivocal, this narrow connection between school and society? Does education really have a pioneering role in changing society and socio-economic circumstances? Should the school be a society in the kiln, or as Dewey calls it, in embryonic form, and what does that actually mean concretely? Shouldn't we ask: what do we allow and don't we allow to enter our schools? And what does this mean for things like the curriculum, the school organization, and for the teachers as professionals? But most of all: what gnawed at me was that it appears that Dewey thinks politically about education and society, but does he really? Doesn't he mix up all kinds of very different human activities, political and non-political, by promoting what he calls 'social democracy'? I wondered...

To summarize: my own formation in pedagogical terms has been strongly influenced by a number of sources, three of which I have touched on here:

- 1- my own religiously coloured upbringing and the education I received in the same atmosphere;
- 2- studying educational theory, and learning in practice during my teacher training; my encounter with phenomenological thinking; Langeveld in particular.
- 3 - and the third source is Dewey's pedagogy and philosophy, with their intimate connections between school and society and his vision of the democratic society and how to defend it and help it further - education as a midwife.

With this part of my luggage internalized I encountered the work of Arendt and started working with it – and there is a pun intended here when I use the term “work”...

#### **4. Spaces for thinking: working with, and a bit against, Arendt**

My "working" with Arendt is first of all an encounter with her person(ality), her biography, and her life in general and in many of its details. It's also an encounter with networks of people, ideas, cultures, stories, and languages. I can state this quite simply: I am intrigued by all this; I was, and still am curious.

So far I have worked with Arendt in two ways: the first is one might say 'immanent': studying and reconstructing her works, and theses etc in their own right, because again very simply they are interesting, not only from an educational, or political or whatever point of view, but mainly because Arendt is a very skilled writer; as I said some of her prose reads like poetry. One can simply like an author because of her writing. And I do.

The other way has more the characteristics of a program – and there I use Arendt's considerations to help shed light on some of the problems of today in education and society. I am very much rooted in the practice of upbringing and education, on diverse levels, and within different surroundings and institutions. Of course you cannot just translate Arendt's ideas one-on-one into educational practice; she herself says about this with some self-knowledge, in the *Crisis*, that the more practical aspects should mainly be left to the pedagogues. Quite right!

Let me give an example. If you look at the state of affairs in education today, you will see that what Heidegger called 'calculating thinking' (das rechnende Denken) is the dominant current at the political level and at the policy level, and also at the level of much scientific research. By this I mean that everything that cannot be calculated, is pushed aside as irrelevant. Educational policy here in the Netherlands is mainly concerned with so-called basic skills, and they, and their implementation are supported by a real battery of scientific research. The main motivation here is fear: fear that "we" will somehow lag "behind", especially in the lists that matter: the PISA's scores etc. As Hartmut Rosa recently put it: we are driven by the fear that there will come a time when there is 'less' (Rosa 2022, p. 26), combined with the still exponentially increasing speed of just about everything around us, which has a negative impact on the intergenerational education project.

This whole situation has led to an increasing emphasis in education on the measurement of qualification, on what is then called "knowledge transfer" - which of course is not really a transfer at all but an offer – and on socialization – becoming a "good citizen" – to the detriment of other important aspects of education, including what my fellow-countryman Gert Biesta has come to call subjectification. In my own words, by this he means the simple but basic idea that *someone* must be, or is qualified, and also a *someone* who has to say yes to what is offered – or no. This touches upon the issue of freedom – the freedom that is essential for education: the ability of the subject to say yes or no to what the older generation has to offer. And it's not very difficult to see that this finds a strong advocate in Hannah Arendt's thinking about the political, and freedom as the core of it.

However, it seems that education as a system is in the grip - not of the acting part of the human condition, but in the work part of it: the machine metaphor seems to be dominant: there is education, there are students, that's where I put my learning material in, and lo and

behold: they are qualified. Citizenship education is a good case study here, when it starts from the naive assumption – already refuted by Dewey, by the way – that if you teach young people enough about democracy, they will automatically become democratic citizens.

It is precisely on this point that Arendt is relevant, because she has expressed herself in such a complex way about the relationship between education and society and the political. Really against this machine-metaphor. However, I think there is a problem that she wants to “decisively divorce” education or schooling from politics (a quote from *The Crisis*). If you look at her descriptions of the political in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere, her “ode” to the human capacity of acting and communicating, and starting something new, and *then* take a look at what ideally goes on or should go on in schools, then it shows that on this practical level she had no idea. For of course, speaking, gesturing, appearing before one’s fellows are part and parcel of education. When a student appears before class to give a book-talk, like I recently observed in a group of 11 year olds in a primary school, that’s what she really does: appear before her class mates, speak to them, communicate with them, and they do the same. There is definitely a political moment in the arendtian sense in education here, and I think it’s such a shame that she did not see this, mainly I think because of her absolute view of childhood versus adulthood.

## **5 Conclusions / questions**

So to my first conclusion. I see Arendt’s work as a correction of the pragmatist’s views of education, but by correcting it, Arendt falls into the trap of separating education and the political too severely. For it is obvious that the political comes into our schools every day, simply because human agents enter it, with their socio-economic, cultural, gender etc make-up, but most of all with their stories of what goes on outside school. My colleague Monique Leygraaf from IPABO teacher training college in Amsterdam gives a fine, and incisive example of this. In an essay in a collection I edited in 2018, she recalls how a four- year old in kindergarten class talks about how a friend of her father’s was taken into custody by the police, and when the teacher asks why this happened, the child says: because he had no papers... As Monique rightly concludes the political intrudes or thrusts itself into everybody’s lives, even that of kindergartners.

So, while acknowledging the idea that school is indeed a middle ground, the institution *between* family and society or world, and also acknowledging the idea that the task of schools is to introduce newcomers into the world, I don’t agree with Arendt on her unrealistic claim of separation of schooling and the political.

On the other hand: the whole idea of education’s purpose of introducing children into the world, and showing what the world is like, instead of using education to change the world, connects in such an interesting way to classic Pädagogik. So that’s why I said that in a way Arendt became part of a distinguished school of continental phenomenological pedagogy.

A second remark, to end my talk with, is that Arendt is a thinker who really was able to create a space for thinking; I think that is the deeper meaning of what she talking about during that famous 1972 round-table conference in Toronto, where Hill reports about (1979). When asked about her “position”: are you a conservative, are you a liberal, where do you stand on this and that, her answer is: *I am nowhere*. It has taken me some time to understand this. But what I now think is that by not letting herself being defined by all these labels, she creates space for

herself to think, without banisters, as she called it. This implied not being too strict, or at least not dogmatic, about boundaries between disciplines, but starting from human experiences in and about the world. She draws attention to the beauty of *being educated*, an experience that is in danger of disappearing from our repertoire, under the dominance of constructivist theory. She is also a thinker who was *so* near to multiple languages, Greek and Latin not in the least, that she was able to dig up lost meanings of words and expressions, dust them off and try to connect them to the present day.

Arendt, as the great teacher she was, enriched our vocabulary with concepts such as natality, plurality, the school as an in-between space, and coming into the world.

I am thankful for what she gave me and the world and continues to give.

Thank you.

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