



SYMPOSIUM

A dialogue on core qualities and practices needed in education
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Keep the questions going

Reflection by Monique Leijgraaf

Conferences can start off in various ways: in a boring way – making you wonder why on earth you took the effort to attend this conference; over the top – making you wonder whether you're at the right manifestation; or in a striking way – making you wonder whether the opening might have been the best part of the entire conference...

To me, the opening of *Unfolding Humans Potential* by Isabelle Biney, a student of the Haarlemmermeer Lyceum fitted into the last category. In her talk, she spoke of her initial feelings of joy when she first went to school. But also of the change in that because of the dominance by results, making her do anything to avoid failing and being labelled as worthless. "The system makes people wonder whether they are good enough," so that system has to be changed.

In Isabelle Biney's opinion, education is a promise, giving people a chance. Therefore her plead for innovation, for a new, real kind of education, which aims to teach students *how* to think instead of *what* to think. This promising start turned out to be an excellent prediction of what was about to happen during the entire conference. Being a teacher educator and a (practitioner) researcher, I would like to reflect on teacher education and on educational research (chapter 2 and 4).

Compared to for instance business schools, schools of architecture or schools of aviation, schools of education and teacher education programs have to deal with the fact that all of their students are in a way experts when it comes to education. At the starting point of a teacher education program, every student has at least twelve years of experience in education, attending primary school, secondary school and maybe other educational institutions. Because of this, a teacher education program might be considered quite a 'safe study' for students just leaving secondary school: they know what to expect, at least they think they do.

Although this labelling of teacher education as a 'safe study' often happens unconsciously, it is a thorn in my flesh. And maybe that's why one of the concepts Colleen McLaughlin argued for (in her reflections at the end of day 1) made so much sense to me: *the concept of dissonance*. Creating dissonance can be a wonderful stimulant to reconsider ideas and practices that are too familiar to a (student) teacher. When we as teacher educators ask – not force – students to question things that they've been doing for a long time, when we actually ask them "to step out of line, not stay in line", then maybe the (student) teachers will have the courage to critically think through what education is about and to even reconsider assumptions that took shape during their own days at school.

Along with Colleen McLaughlin, I think that it's our job as teacher educators not to create harmony, but to create what one of the attendants of the conference called a *safe haven for unsafe learning*. It's our job to explicitly not iron out the complexity of education, but to create dissonance in a safe educational setting.

This argument for creating dissonance presupposes that teacher education is not about creating answers for (student) teachers, but about "keeping the questions going," as Colleen McLaughlin put it. The most central aspect of teacher education is to create a process of self-inquiry which is quite systematic and which keeps teachers forever asking questions. As a teacher educator, you're more like a Socratic gadfly than the omniscient expert.

Trying to be a genuine Socratic gadfly, provoking students to question ideas and practices they're familiar with and take for granted, involves that we as teacher educators systematically inquire into our own practices as well. And that brings me to the second notion I'd like to reflect upon: educational research.

Being a researcher at a research-university, Arjen Wals recounted being criticized by one of the teachers involved in his research. This teacher told him she hated people like him; coming into their schools; getting information from their students; writing articles about it that nobody reads; making career on those articles; but what's in it for the students?

Wals argued that from the perspective of *Unfolding Human Potential*, research 'should' have a pedagogical, emancipatory end: the people who are participating in the research do have to gain something from it. Michael Fielding added that research isn't something *that is done to* schools, but something which schools are *involved in*.

Being a practitioner researcher at a university of applied sciences, I consider precisely this emancipatory feature of our type of research an important and 'good' thing. Our various research projects have their starting point in practices we as researchers are involved in as well, and aim to both increase practice wisdom (Aristotle) and make heard the voices of the marginalized.

To participate in *Unfolding Human Potential* has been an inspiring and thought-provoking experience to me. I'd like to thank everyone involved in (the organisation of) this conference. Like Michael Fielding said: "There is a lot of pressure on education. We need to hold hands with people from different countries to support and encourage each other. You

can't do it by yourself. Network. Otherwise: how do you sustain the work?" This conference sure helped us to sustain our educational work!

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