

# The way to school as world in-between : narratives of boys and girls experiences in the 1950s

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# The way to school as world in-between. Narratives of boys and girls experiences in the 1950s

**(Red.) Der Schulweg ist das Intermedium zwischen dem Zuhause und der Schule, eine Welt, die nicht pädagogisch strukturiert und von keinen Erwachsenen kontrolliert wird – zumindest nicht aus pädagogischen Gründen. Obgleich der Schulweg zur täglichen Erfahrung von Schülerinnen und Schülern gehört, wurde er von der pädagogischen Forschung kaum je beachtet. Der folgende Beitrag berichtet von einer Untersuchung über Erfahrungen auf dem Schulweg vor 50 Jahren in Belgien. Der methodische Ansatz der oral history bringt nicht nur wenig bekannte Erlebnisberichte zu Tage, sondern zeigt auch die gender-biased Struktur von Erinnerungsberichten.**

■ Mélanie Surmont

On the other hand, I can remember very clearly the journeys I made to and from the school because they were so tremendously exciting. Great excitement is probably the only thing that really interests a six-year-old boy and it sticks in his mind. In my case, the excitement centered around my new tricycle. I rode to school on it every day with my eldest sister riding on hers. No grown-ups came with us, and I can remember oh so vividly how the two of us used to go racing at enormous tricycle speeds down the middle of the road and then, most glorious of all, when we came to a corner, we would lean to one side and take it on two wheels. All this, you must realize, was in the good old days when the sight of a motor-car on the street was an event, and it was quite safe for tiny children to go tricycling and whooping their way to school in the centre of the highway (Dahl 1984, p. 23).

## Introduction

The way to school is a «space-time», a place between two worlds, home and school, the private and the public, worlds controlled by adults. It is considered as a place and a time in which children can spend some time without the direct involvement of adults and formal learning, a place of transition from daughter or son to schoolgirl or schoolboy. It is also described as psychological and physical space in which children can escape the immediate supervision of adults.

This subject has attracted little attention from scholars although it was and it is a daily reality for many children. The way to school is one of the «most noisy» and curious *silences* (Silver 1992, pp. 97–108; Grosvenor/Lawn/Rousmaniere 1999), a part of the *black box* (Depaepe/Simon 1995) in the history of education.

Similar research has been done on the influence of school architecture and design on the outdoor playing experience within the primary school (Armitage 2005) and on the experience of the school canteen and dinner time in school (Burke 2005). The same applies for the recent histories of the materialities of schooling (Grosvenor/Lawn 2005). Material objects of the school culture have no use at all if they are not «activated» in a set of organizational, social, and cultural relations. There is also the Spanish research approach (with Augustin Escolano Benito, Julio Ruiz Berrio and Antonio Viñao Frago) to the ethno-history of education and school archeology where these new themes are gaining ground. This is indicated by, for example, the conference on the history of education in Spain about *Etnohistoria de la escuela* (Universidad de Burgos/SEDHE 2003). This Spanish wave (*la cultura escolar* and *etnohistoria de la escuela*) has used an ethnographic methodology in its own research projects. The ethno-historiography of education tries to develop interpretations and explanations to give an anthropological-cultural and hermeneutic reading of the research data (Escolano 2004). For the school culture, this means that school ethnographic research uses ethnographic methods and the anthropological reflection in the study of a scholastic institution. The only thing that is unique is the chosen «field», namely «the school».

I found only one scholarly article about «the way to school» experience, which was by Jaume Trilla Bernet (2004). I was inspired by the way he explored the school surroundings in order to be able to say something about the school and its culture, about how schools are and should be. However, his research and mine differ in the nature of the data resources, the research object, and the time indication. He used extracts from novels and visual sources (photographs and paintings) to illustrate the experience of the way to and from school. I also used these sources but more as a kind of entry into the

material and the formation of hypotheses than as an actual basis for the study as I felt his approach was too one-sided. Furthermore, my principal sources are oral histories. Concerning the object of his research, Trilla Bernet tried to understand what «school» means by studying the environment, while I tried to get an idea of the children's experience of the way to school. The last difference, time indication, is absent in his research, while I do specify that I am concerned with the 1950s.

The lack of information led me to use other sources to investigate the subject: novels and juvenile literature. I looked for descriptions of how children experienced the way to school, starting with Roald Dahl's autobiography *Boy* (1985) and finishing with *Pinocchio* (Collodi 1881/1988). The authors, mostly well-educated men, told memorable, entertaining, even dramatic stories about the way-to-school experience.

The way to school is represented as an intensely experienced adventure, often in great contrast with the experience of life inside school. Sometimes the way to school is a space devoted to autonomy and freedom; other times a battleground associated with feelings of daring and fear. Nearly always, there is a contrast between the experience of going to school and school itself and home life, domains within which the power of adults is wielded. The environment that the pupil (the protagonist) occupies between home and school is lived with all the senses. These surroundings lure, entice, and guide the school boys and girls. During this daily journey, boys and girls come in contact with children of the same age group but also with adults, both models and anti-models. The authors tell how children day-dream and hang around during this trip, about the magnetic force of the candy store, about the mischief they get into. They describe how friendship and enmity grow, about their quarrels that started inside the school and continued on the way home. In brief, the reader has little difficulty in identifying with the protagonist and vividly remembering the way between home and school as a daily adventure.

### Research Design

I interviewed adults (born in 1943) who had gone to school during the 1950s in Bellegem, a village in the southwest of Belgium. How did they experience the way to school? Which interactions, situations, experiences, etc. took place during this journey? Did boys and girls experience this way differently? Was there a difference between going to school with friends or on one's own? Did the seasons influence the «way-to-school experience»? Did it feel like a moment of freedom and autonomy? What rules were imposed on them by parents and teachers concerning this route? What did the children feel, dream, think about on the way?

I decided to ask each of the interviewees to walk

the school route again with me. Their stories differed from the representation of the experience by novels and juvenile literature not just because they were being «told» by the original protagonists but also because they were less educated sons and daughters of farmers. Moreover, women were given an opportunity to tell their stories, too.

The difference between the male and female school memories of the way to school was to be expected not only because of the selection of subjects recalling the way to school but also because of the narrative style, the relationship between my informants and me, and the degree in which the past carried over into the present. Men tended to tell more «sturdy» stories and tried to impress through their choice of vocabulary, while women described their «way-to-school experience» in a less pretentious, less dramatic way, and rarely told of spectacular events. It seemed as though the men could look at their past with a certain distance, while the women identified themselves much more with the school girls they were and the things they did in their childhood. Gaining their confidence was not easy. Men, on the other hand, often took over the interview and couldn't stop telling me about their childhood.

### Results

1) *The contrasting experience of life in and out of schools was not as pronounced as it was represented in novels and juvenile literature.* For the school girls, this clearly was the case. There was no mention of a feeling of freedom and autonomy during the trip to school. The strict rules imposed by parents and teachers simply extended into the «way-to-school experience». Adults maintained continuous control over the girls, even though they were not physically present. The boys, on the other hand, tried to escape this authority-exercised-from-a-distance. The adult control is reflected in the compulsory lining up outside the classroom and leaving the school, the difference in time for ending school so there would be no contact between girls and boys going home, and the compulsory (for girls) visit to the church before entering the school grounds. Parents also imposed strict rules concerning the way to school for girls.

2) *What did the children do on the way to school?* The variety in activities is great, at least for boys. Girls were generally very dutiful and honest, and it was feared that the environment could lead them off the right path so they obeyed the instructions of their parents and teachers. The girls' principal activity passing from school to home was talking. Most of the women could not remember what about, but presumably they talked about school life.

There is a direct link between «what» happens and «where» it happens. Space shapes the experi-

ence. Thus, a small, narrow street running parallel with the main village street was better suited for mischief because the main street was under the continuous supervision of casually passing adults. On the way to school, the children played, got into mischief, teased the weaker children, and the boys scuffled. The candy store always attracted children, although buying candy was not very common at that time. Further, school boys swapped pictures for their collections, played football, and raced, running and with bicycles, in the street. Dates between boys and girls rarely occurred; and only one informant could tell me about this subject. Nursery class was mixed, but from then on the sexes were completely segregated.

What seems to have left strong traces in the memory of the school boys is the slaughtering of cows and pigs. They kept track of it and on «slaughter day», they went to school earlier in order to be on time to watch or witness the execution of the animals, which they described in great detail. Tracking down and catching animals was another thing to do when going to school or returning home and this without noble intentions. Frogs were caught in order to blow them up and tadpoles ended their day of life swimming in a jam jar. The accounts of the women mentioned no animals, except for one story about the rescue of a kitten from the vent of the chicory factory. And during the kite season, boys made themselves kites and flew them on the way home after school.

- 3) *Descriptions of the surroundings and the places the children passed on the way between school and home* were a substantial part of the school memories of the informants. What was left of these surroundings prompted these memories. It is striking that the boys varied their routes for many reasons, while the girls always took the same way, mostly along the main village street.
- 4) *Children rarely went this whole trip on their own.* There were no fixed arrangements between friends, and the children met rather casually on the way to school or back home. The boys (friends and/or brothers) went together, and the girls walked in the company of other girls (friends and/or sisters). There was horizontal socialization with the children meeting with their own age group and also socialization between generations. Parents rarely accompanied their children, but children did come into contact with some odd characters. Each of them had his or her personal nickname, referring to their profession or to a striking physical trait or character. Most of these «strange» figures were striking or occupied a public position in the village.
- 5) *The experience of the way to and from school was apparently seasonal.* This can be observed in some typical words, referring to the seasons. For example, they talked about the «cherry time», the «nut time», the «kite-flying time», and so on. The season-dependent experience was reflected not only in the descriptions of the weather but also in the descriptions of the clothes they were wearing. While winter was a period of snow fun, the biting cold was still fresh in the memory of many of the informants, and certainly for those who had a long way to walk. The boys wore an improvised pair of trousers, clogs, or boots and some of them had gloves made of rabbit fur. During the hottest months of the year, the school boys wore a kind of open shoe made of «caoutchouc» (India rubber). Some of the male informants clearly remembered their sweaty smell. Children who came from far away often brought along an aluminium bottle of water and liquorice in the summer. The sunshine also drew the adults out, and they would have been sitting in front of their houses. The school boys and girls would greet them while passing.
- Autumn was also a lively period. Autumn meant «cherry time», «nut time», «kite-flying time», and «harvest». For the boys it was a golden time for stealing fruit and nuts on the way home. Cherry stones were zealously collected to use as stakes for games played in school and on the way to and from school.
- For the children on farms, autumn was often a period of absence at school because they had to help their parents with the harvest.
- Finally, when it was «windy season», the schoolboys made kites to fly after school. In the period between two seasons, there were also the ordinary games that did not depend on the seasons as did playing marbles and jacks.
- 6) *Most of the children went on foot.* Having a bicycle in those times was a luxury and there were few cars.
- 7) *There is a difference between the experience of the way out and the return journey,* but it is not as clear as that which is depicted in novels and juvenile literature. The children tried to spin out the time going to school and returned home hastily. The route back gave more opportunity for mischief for the boys than the way to school. This could have been because, more often than not, the boys went home as a group (committing mischief was rarely carried out alone), the arrival time at home was not strictly supervised, and the sustained effort and sitting still in class simply called for some creative outlet after the school.
- 8) *The time to go to school varied from five minutes till half an hour.* It is interesting that those who lived farther away from school dawdled less and rarely were tardy. Those who lived near the school did idle along more often, and the boys among them committed more mischief than did their more distant classmates.
- 9) *Arriving tardy at school* was exceptional. If it did happen, they did not lie about it. It's impossible to understand the experience of the way to and

from school without saying something about the *traffic* at that time. In the 1950's, there was hardly any traffic in Bellegem. Every now and then a tractor or a farm cart pulled by a horse went by, delivering beer or fruit and vegetables. Thus, the children could spend a lot of time playing in the street, not only on the way to and from school but also in their leisure time. At least, this was the case for boys. Girls hardly ever idled going to school and back: they did what their parents and teachers told them to do. And during their free time, they frequently had to help with the household chores.

Walking along their road to school also revived other school memories for the experience of the school journey cannot be separated from the *experienced school culture*. This means, in the case of the girls, that the strict Catholic regime with its emphasis on penance and guilt carried on into the experience of the way to and from school. Obedience and virtuousness were demanded and complied with. In case of the boys, the strict regime also extended into their «way-to-school experience» but in reverse. The corporal punishment and the long suffered self-control the whole school day seemed to require, as I have noted, an outlet outside the school walls.

The memories concerning school culture can be summed up as follows:

- memories of the teachers and their particular corporal punishments;
- the school organization;
- the description of the school buildings;
- (in the narratives of the men) the mischief committed inside the school;
- the quarrels between teachers as perceived by the boys.

This research is an initial step in the exploration of space-time memory in the history of education. In the near future, we would like to explore more places (toilets, cafeterias, playgrounds, the coal

house, etc.) related to the daily school life in order to try to understand «the everyday school format» (which characteristics identify a space or site as «school space»?) and what «school» meant for children (how the pupils experienced these places?).

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