

Disability, education and history : a refreshing and explosive cocktail recipe for educational historiography

Autor(en): **Verstraete, Pieter**

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Disability, education and history:

A refreshing and explosive cocktail recipe for educational historiography

(Red.) Seit deutlich wurde, dass die traditionelle pädagogische Historiographie grosse Geschichten erzählt und dabei einseitig auf ein Geschlecht fixiert ist, erlebt der Begriff der Diskontinuität eine Konjunktur, wie man sie nur noch beim Begriff der Diskursanalyse findet. Der nachfolgende Beitrag zeigt, wie die Komplexität der Geschichtsschreibung wächst, wenn sie die kulturelle Konstruktion von Normalität bzw. Behinderung berücksichtigt.

■ Pieter Verstraete

Refreshing mix

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards both European and American educational historiography have developed a critical corpus of knowledge and research methodologies which effectively transformed a rather naïve intercourse with our educational past into a highly complex and refined dialogue between the historian and bygone educational experiences. Among other things the incorporation of concepts like «race», «class» and «gender» have contributed largely to the construction of a critical and self-conscious attitude towards those sites of learning which only remain reachable by e.g. the silent fragments of archival records, the trembling voices of old memories or the blurred images of yellowed photographs. A few decades ago another concept addressed itself to historical researchers and carried with it the promise of continuing – and even enlarging to a certain extent – the critical impact of its intellectual predecessors, namely «disability».

The belief that the concept of disability could add something valuable to the ongoing critical intercourse with historical events has been launched at the end of the twentieth century in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Disability Studies. Countering the dominant medical interpretation of what it was to be disabled in a particular society Disability Studies scholars set out to disentangle the web of innumerable influences which caught a person's identity into a passive and dependent image of being disabled.¹ It is precisely in these (para-)academic circles that disability set up for its new role as efficient instrument in critical inquiries into the nature and functioning of contemporary societies. Besides the com-

parison with other cultures and the exposure of societies' shortcomings in dealing with persons with disabilities, one of the most important sites where the objectivity and naturalness of both the processes leading to the label of disability and the resulting disabled identities itself could be contested was history. In her influential review essay on disability history, for example, which was published by *The American Historical Review* in 2003, leading scholar Catherine Kudlick explicitly stated that «just as gender and race have had an impact well beyond women and people of color, disability is so vast in its economic, social, political, cultural, religious, legal, philosophical, artistic, moral, and medical import that it can force historians to reconsider virtually every concept, every event, every «given» we have taken for granted» (Kudlick 2003, p. 767).

Kudlick's vast and striking statement also goes up for what could be called the «educational import» of disability. It nowadays indeed seems quiet rightly to say that to speak about disability is to speak about education and vice versa. A short glimpse into the *Encyclopedia of disability*, for instance, edited by disability scholar Gary Albrecht quickly reveals an extensive entree on «disability and education» which besides a short historical perspective stresses and reaffirms the growing international interest in education as one of the foremost means – besides medicine and work – to ameliorate the frequently deprived social situation of persons with disabilities (Albrecht 2006, p. 565ff.). From the moment disability at the end of the eighteenth century became diagnosed as a social and political problem for modern society, it, especially in Western countries, entered into an almost symbiotic relationship with both educational practices and theories. To quote just one historical example let me refer here to the work of the French Valentin Haüy (1745–1822) who at the end of the eighteenth century developed an educational system for blind people primarily intended to «wrest them from mendicancy» (Haüy 1786/1985, p. 7f.).

But nowadays, more than ever, also the reverse statement seems to be justified: talking about education is talking about disability or being different. It has indeed become very hard not to make use of notions like inclusive practices, individual differences and special needs when discussing educational matters. Moreover, schoolmasters and school administrators alike increasingly are confronted with children with disabilities or special educational needs in real life. The case of the Flemish educational sys-

tem can illustrate this. On the one hand the school population attending special schools in Flanders increased with 41% over the last 15 years. On the other hand also the amount of children with disabilities attending regular schools (so called inclusive or integrated education) has been raised enormously: from 700 in 1983 up till 5871 in the school year 2005/2006 (Vandenbroucke 2007). If disability and education of course do not coincide completely, they, however, seem so intertwined that one can hardly imagine someone speaking about educational practices or theories without mentioning individuals with disabilities and vice versa.

Despite this contingent affinity between disability and education, neither Marie Madeleine Compère nor Roy Lowe mentions disability as one of the major themes or *territoires communs* in educational historiography in their scholastic and encyclopedic overviews (Compère 1995; Lowe 2000). Despite this striking absence of disability in two of the most important overviews of educational historiography disability not at all is overlooked by contemporary historians of education. On the contrary, it seems that during the past decade or so disability extremely well found its way to the historical scrutiny of educational past. First of all, there was the *History of education* 2005 special issue *Disability and education: historical perspectives from Europe* guest edited by Annemieke van Drenth. Secondly, one also can recall the session of the *International Standing Conference for the History of Education*, which was held 2008 in Hamburg and invited international scholars to discuss disability and its pedagogical consequences within the overall conference theme of «Children and youth at risk». These initiatives unveil only a little of the radiated attraction of a mix of «disability», «education», and «history» for educational historiography. Its refreshing nature already has been pointed out by Annemieke van Drenth in her thoughtful introduction to the above-mentioned *History of Education* special issue where among other things she highlighted the importance of «disability» in handling the methodological difficulties surrounding historical concepts like voice and visibility (Van Drenth 2005). Without pretending an exhaustive list of all the possibilities entailed by turning towards «disability» in educational historiography here are some of the new themes and sharpening potentials of «disability».

First of all, research into the learning processes by which persons with disabilities learn to live with their assistant technology like cochlear implants, wheelchairs or guide dogs can reveal new insights in the formation and functioning of identity in our ever-changing societies. What exactly for example was meant when after World War One many of the allied and central forces proclaimed that some of their veterans had to learn how to be blind or lame. Secondly, and following Rosemary Deem who regretted the fact that the greater realization of the complexity of social and educational disadvantage

brought forward by the feminist perspective had not very often been extended to special needs and students with disabilities (Deem 2000, p. 457), disability could very well sharpen the analyses made by historians of education of the manifold relationships between the body of the schoolchild and the energetic politics shaped by modern thought. The position of a particular disfigurement indeed reveals much of the reigning norms and often unconscious prejudices reigning in this or that society. But also the way the West has addressed the existence of so-called «monstrous appearances» like hermaphrodites lay bare a domain of inquiry where the complex interplay of gender and disability can give insight in the construction of our current attitudes to learning processes leading to a transsexual identity. Furthermore and only to finish this short not exhaustive description of the potentials contained by «disability» we can refer to some of the new focuses its introduction into the history of education would bring forth: What exactly is the role played by the senses in the history of education? How does seeing, touching, hearing, tasting and smelling comply with the educational and often hidden agendas of (neo-)liberal societies? What exactly is the educational potential of exceptional spaces like the seaside and the Alps in the instruction of respectively rachitic and mentally disabled children? How are disabled persons represented in reading books for children or how are images of disabled children presented in the normal curriculum?

Explosive cocktail

Let us consider the preceding paragraph as the recipe and a short description of the possible qualities of an intellectual cocktail made of three main ingredients: «disability», «education» and «history». Making an attractive cocktail is one thing. Consuming it is a completely different story, and especially when you drink too much of them. But then again it is precisely the effect of drinking too much cocktails that we would like to put on the fore when outlining one more essential potential contained by the notion of disability for educational historiography. Most of the time one does not realize that the consumed beverages contain considerable amounts of strong liquor and thus continues to drink of them like it was sober soda. However, at a certain moment – and most of the times this occurs when standing up from the chair one sat on – one is struck with drunkenness and very soon slides down into a state of complete intoxication. The contours of buildings and moving persons become very flew. Everything seems to turn upside down revealing unnoticed and probably imaginary parts. There is no part of the self that can sit and quietly observe the dizzy state one became part of. Everything, from the lowest sense to the highest intellectual thought, is being occupied by unusual scenes and distressful notions. And then comes that

explosive moment when body and mind hand over their self-evidences and render themselves to a blank and fallow space: the floor. Lying extensively on what used to bear the weight of our thoughts and movements we promise ourselves never ever again to drink that much again. Almost unconscious we then surrender to and at the same time witness the explosion of our being.

The evocation of the cocktail made of «disability», «education» and «history» not only points towards the refreshing potential it has for educational historiography but also underlines the fact that it can urge historians of education to revise their current relationship with truth and thus enable them to leave behind the modern consolations of knowledge and power. Of course, many contemporary scholars have left the paths of pure representation – *bloss zeigen wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* – in favor of a highly critical walk through the educational mountains of mass schooling, literacy, childhood, imperialism, curriculum or progressivism. Undoubtedly this innovative scholarship has during the last three decades or so rendered a detailed map of dangerous gaps, tremendous abysses, sudden subsidence and subtle differences in height. The question, however, which has to be asked is whether these divergent blueprints and cartographies not currently have received a status similar to the nowadays wide-spread use of Global Positioning Systems leading the researcher or author from A to B without causing any discomfort in his or her own position (Masschelein 2006). Regardless of the writing self the focus is directed to what is outside like the meaning of a text, the bygone or contemporary interpretation of a particular event, the hidden message of a picture or the cryptic stories of suppressed voices. If the notion «disability» effectively can be used by historians of education in order to de-mythologize the construction of subjectivities, it more importantly even bears in its name the potential of stepping one step further: it enables the writer to disable itself. In line of the particular discomfort sought among others by controversial historians like Michel Foucault and Reinhart Koselleck the concept of «disability» can be employed to direct the attention of the researcher towards his own understanding and convictions by means of an educational past (Foucault 1980; Koselleck 2002). Among other disability history scholars Henri-Jacques Stiker has given a wonderful description of the discomfort we try to put here in the spotlights. «My image of myself, constructed with effort to live, to survive, to face others [...] blurs, trembles, even cracks. I thought I was like this ... and look what I've become! [...]. I saw the world in a certain way, along with society and other people, and now they are completely different: much more vulnerable, much more ill willed, and at times much more unexpected or even much better. Everything changes place; everyone changes roles. All realities disclose an unedited other side. I have to start all over again ... because

it is my vision that is being wiped out» (Stiker 1997, p. 3f.).

Would it not be possible that it is precisely this effect which can prevent truth to calcify in the context of a post-modern educational historiography and can be thought from exploring unknown spaces where no single human ever has stepped down? Forty years after mankind left its footprint on the surface of the moon we pay billions of dollars to explore the space surrounding the earth and tend to forget that in the vicinity of ourselves and even within ourselves there is so much left to discover. One way to approach those unknown spaces and blank spots is by taking the *Disability* and cross our very own skin towards the outside of our very own insights.

Turning over the leaves of historical schoolbooks for people with an auditory disability, bending over dusty boxes of yellow paper in long forgotten institutional archives for mentally retarded or going through the digital files of an educational experiment conducted ten years ago then will not leave the self of the researcher unaffected but will lead so to say to the dis-ablement of his or her own previous thoughts, manners and values. Taking into account its very own meaning the word «disability» itself already embodies the effect of drinking too much cocktails or taking a space shuttle to the other side of the atmosphere for according to the dictionary «to disable» means «to deprive of capability or effectiveness» or «to render legally disqualified». «To disable» thus also can mean to put out of action or to render in-valid and in this way corresponds with the etymological background of the word «education» in the act of educational historiography: Derived from the Latin word *educere* «education» refers to a process intended to lead forth or to pull out. Would it then not be really educational for historians of education to strive for those insights which dis-able the self, ex-pose one's most intimate thoughts and render its most private convictions to a great extent vulnerable; to construct their own shuttle and very intimately celebrate the fortieth anniversary of mankind's huge step on the moon. Just like gender, race and class, disability indeed offers – literally as well as figuratively – the historian of education a clear-cut, refreshing, provocative and even explosive attitude for doing historical research which explicitly searches for the dis-ablement of the author's self.

Footnote

- 1 Highly influenced by Marxist theory there nowadays exists a widespread consensus about the conception of disability as a social construct. This social-constructivist approach of both disability and persons with disabilities stands in almost complete opposition to the medical interpretation which prevailed until the '60 of the latest century and reduced disability to a mere, invariable and natural part of the human body.

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Die Pädagogisierung sozialer Probleme in historischer Perspektive – ein Diskussionsbeitrag

(Red.) Seit im Kalten Krieg auch die Technologie und die Wirtschaft («Human Capital Theory») pädagogisch definiert wurden, kann man von einer weitgehenden Pädagogisierung der Welt sprechen, deren Wurzeln 250 Jahre zurück liegen. Fritz Osterwalder nimmt ein Buch, das sich diesem Pädagogisierungs-Phänomen widmet, zum Anlass für weitergehende Überlegungen.

■ Fritz Osterwalder

Im November 2005 standen die Vorstädte von Frankreichs Metropolen Paris und Lyon in Flammen. Heranwachsende und junge Erwachsene lieferten der Polizei nächtelang wilde Strassenschlachten, zündeten Autos und öffentliche Gebäude an und plünderten Supermärkte, nachdem in einer Auseinandersetzung mit den Ordnungshütern zwei jugendliche Immigranten verunglückten. Bezüglich der Diagnose dieser Ereignisse bildete sich bald ein Konsens in der öffentlichen Wahrnehmung: Das Malaise der Immigration bezüglich Be-

schäftigung und Integration in die französische Gesellschaft, die Gettoisierung und Verslumung der riesigen Vorstädte, die in den 60er- und 70er-Jahren schnell, sozial und bauhygienisch dürftig ausgestattet hochgezogen wurden, wurden ursächlich ins Licht der Auseinandersetzung gerückt. Doch die Perspektive, die seitens der Regierung zur Lösung dieser im einfachen Sinn des Wortes brennenden Probleme eröffnet wurde, bezog sich weder auf die schlechten Wohnverhältnisse, noch auf die Entmischung der Bevölkerung und schon gar nicht auf die schlechten Aussichten auf dem Arbeitsmarkt der Einwohner dieser Vorstädte, sondern auf Erziehung. «Certains Français ont besoin d'un accompagnement personnalisé en matière d'emploi et d'éducation. L'école c'est le lieu de rendez-vous de la République» (de Villepin, in: *Le Monde* Nr. 18928, 2. Dez. 2005), erklärte der damalige Premierminister Dominique de Villepin vor dem Parlament. Dabei ging es nicht um zusätzliche Fächer oder eine verlängerte Schulzeit, sondern im Fokus dieser Perspektive stand der individuelle Wandel, die individuelle Erziehung der Jugendlichen, die potentiell Autos anzündeten und sich mit der Gendarmerie Strassenschlachten lieferten.