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## Enabling Human Potential to Unfold Within School Environments: Education as Dialogue and Narrative at Multiple Levels

By Hartger Wassink & Shanti George

### Introduction

How can a paradigm shift take place within schools, towards pedagogies that foster social connectedness as well as diversity, and away from standardised instruction? The 'Unfolding' symposium held in the Netherlands in February 2017 – hosted by NIVOZ in collaboration with the Learning for Well-being Foundation – creatively addressed these challenging questions about education today.

Inspiring examples from everyday practice in classrooms and schools served as a powerful start to each session, in the form of high-quality short videos of daily situations specially filmed for the symposium (see below). Interviews followed with the teachers and school principals who were the protagonists of the films, and then mixed tables of practitioners and academicians mulled over the themes that emerged from the films and interviews. Only thereafter was the floor given to academic experts who proved more than willing to put theory at the service of practice. (In this way, the symposium reversed conventional formats that place experts from academe in the centre, with educators and other practitioners listening and responding rather than leading.

The insights and ideas generated – through the exciting process just described – highlighted 'dialogue' and the narratives that emerged... somewhat similar to the narrative that can unfold as each child discovers meaning and potential life purpose, in the school environment and beyond it, through dialogue with the world around.

## Talking about good education

The choice of dialogue as the central mode of conversation within the symposium was deliberately made, in response to the subject under discussion.

Discussing what good education entails is complicated. How can we best talk about the unfolding of human potential, what is to be desired in that process and what responsibilities emerge for educators and others? Which core concepts will help us to describe all this? Much of the complexity stems from the moral dimension that is always involved in conversations about education, and also from the nature of education as a practice. Because of these two characteristics, simple conversations around these subjects tend to be unsatisfactory. How can dialogue enable us to do justice to the moral dimensions of education as well as to the significance of education as a practice?

The example below shows how conversations on good education inevitably include a moral dimension:

If we wish children to grasp and value the diversity of the human world through teaching them geography, we have several options. We can try to increase their knowledge by asking them to learn countries and their capital cities by heart. We can teach them about diverse norms in different cultures and societies. We can invite them to assess their own culture critically, to understand differences and to develop an opinion about the desirability of those differences.

But as soon as we start telling them about countries, we are making moral choices. Is the Crimea part of Russia, or the Ukraine? Is Taiwan an independent country, or is it part of China? And what about Tibet? Why do we – from a western European perspective – regard one country with a Muslim culture as an ally and another such country as a potential enemy? Is it possible at all to compare cultures while carefully avoiding the question of whether some aspects of those cultures are better or more desirable than others, and if so better for whom?

This simple example shows that it is impossible to avoid moral questions, even with an apparently straightforward subject like geography. The complexity only increases when we take into account that many classrooms now contain diverse groups of pupils from all kinds of different backgrounds. The way a teacher approaches geography is not just about imparting objective knowledge but – critically – about how one human being relates to another with respect to their different cultural backgrounds.

The second challenge when we talk about good education is the nature of education as a practice, with teachers continually having to choose from a multitude of possibilities. In making these choices, teachers are led by some of their more or less objective aims, by their personal beliefs about what is right and by practical considerations generated by specific situations. These entangled dimensions around the imperative to act contribute to the vulnerability of the teaching profession. If we do not acknowledge the situational

complexity of education practice – for instance if we insist that discussions focus only on education based on objective facts that can be measured and compared across schools and educators – we are missing the crucial point about what makes conversations about good education so difficult. Very significantly, we are also ignoring important opportunities to improve education.

In short, if we intend to have a meaningful conversation about good education, we have to be able to exchange views and perspectives on the moral dimensions of education (which are inevitably subjective), and we have to stay as close as possible to educational practice while doing so. This is where dialogue – comes in, and why the symposium embraced it.

## Dialogue and narrative

Dialogue is, literally translated, about the ‘flow of meaning.’ A dialogue differs from our regular day-to-day verbal exchanges. We are very familiar with discussions that are directed to arriving at a conclusion as quickly as possible (‘efficiently’), based usually on the practical need to accomplish something in the short term. To do this, we interrupt each other, we try to convince others about our own viewpoint, we do not ask questions in order to avoid having to explore different points of view and if we are asked a question we sometimes choose not to answer it. The person who puts forward the ‘best’ arguments or who has used the ‘smartest’ tactics, ‘wins.’ Subsequently one perspective – that represents a partial interpretation of a certain situation – gains a dominance to which the others have to adapt.

This strategy is not very helpful if we wish to discuss issues and related questions that go beyond ‘getting things done’ within a time schedule. If, for instance, the subject relates to what ‘good education’ is – what different perspectives are applicable, and how people vary in their assessment of the value of those perspectives and act accordingly – we should enter into a dialogue instead. Engaging in dialogue requires us to let go of the idea that the conversation should lead to a concrete ‘result.’ It is about making room in the conversation and to avoid closing it down as soon as possible. To achieve this, we need to ask questions instead of making statements. We need to empathise with others instead of convincing them of our viewpoint. We need to talk very carefully and to abide closely by some important guidelines, instead of intervening in the conversation when and how we see fit.

The symposium’s use of dialogue enabled safe spaces to be created within the conversations at the tables, by drawing on several elements:

- the intimate atmosphere at the tables, with ten people from varying backgrounds gathered at each round table;
- the facilitative role played by a table host chosen from among the participants;
- a short introduction to the key elements of dialogue, with several ‘focus’ questions provided for the table host to choose from in order to frame the exchange.

Since participants knew the guidelines, and especially that the aim was not to arrive at a shared conclusion, they felt comfortable about confiding personal and sometimes intimate

perceptions and experiences. The table hosts creatively followed guidelines that helped the dialogue flow around the ‘focus questions’ which were formulated in a way that would prompt people to talk about personal perspectives. On occasion, when fundamental differences were revealed, the dialogue offered a safe ‘holding space’ to explore these differences without pressure to resolve them.

With this element of dialogue built into the symposium, the conversations at the tables and in plenary sessions allowed narratives to bloom. This seems only logical in retrospect, because people give meaning to their experiences by telling stories. Narratives and stories are multidimensional in nature since we take a personal experience as a starting point to give words to how we think about a certain concept, and while we are telling our story we display our feelings in relation to events and relationships.

The point of a story is not to convince listeners, but rather to help them – and ourselves – to gain some insight into how we think and feel about a particular concept. Almost always we do this by relating an example from practice. Because it is our experience and our feelings that we are illuminating through the story, we do not have to defend ourselves. And other people can relate empathetically to the feelings we are sharing, even though their interpretation of a certain experience may differ radically from ours.

The personal narratives that were exchanged at the tables resonated in a natural way with the human emotional element that was already so real and visible in the films and in the related interviews that provided an opening impetus for each session within the symposium.

In this way, beginning with the ‘wholeness’ of the examples from everyday practice that were captured in the films, the symposium added the ‘wholeness’ of the experiences of the participants by inviting them to share their subjective personal stories, rather than reducing the richness of the filmed examples to generalisations by way of ‘objective analysis.’ A broad range of perspectives and interpretations unfolded that together formed the starting point for new insights and new shared meanings. Participants in the symposium could then better understand the complexity of the question of what good education is and they could address the paradoxes that emerge when we try to engage in creating good education in practice.

## The wholeness of educational practice as captured in six short films

How can dialogue enable us to do justice to the moral dimensions of education as well as to the significance of education as a practice? We repeat this question that was posed earlier in the article, and we now propose to illustrate answers to it by drawing on six film clips that were shown at the start of sessions at the symposium. Each short film represents a dialogue with an inspiring teacher or school leader that took place within her or his everyday working environment. Each film also elicits a narrative about its protagonists that contributes to a meta-narrative about what good education is and how to create and maintain it through everyday practice. A seventh film about an inspiring teacher educator is expanded into a fuller narrative that follows in the next article and that provides an example of how the films described below could similarly be brought more fully to life. Links are

provided to each film, after a short illustration of how it illuminates dialogue and narratives around good education.

Around 25 children below the age of nine sit in a relaxed manner around their teacher, Marianne Rongen, in the Wittering primary school in the Netherlands. Fundamental to education at this school, Marianne tells us, is that children experience sufficient room in their environment to explore and learn through discovery. Marianne therefore tells the children gathered around her about the possibilities that are available for them to choose between in the coming hour – for example sliding in the indoor gym, building with blocks, carefully experimenting with liquid and solid substances in a little laboratory or working with letters and numbers. Marianne facilitates a dialogue between each child and this rich learning environment without herself directing them, and her voice remains neutral and her face receptive to the children's different responses. See <https://vimeo.com/202772864>

Dialogue around good education can also take the form of a teacher reflecting aloud – in this case to the camera – about teaching and pedagogy as experienced every day in the classroom, here by Marta Zorrilla who teaches English at the Escola Marina in Barcelona. Her face is pensive and smiling in turn as she thinks aloud about moving away from conventional methods and finding ways forward in collaboration with her pupils. The camera intersperses illustrative moments from her class in primary school where Marta interacts with children usually at shoulder-to-shoulder level. Openly and quite at ease, she talks about her struggles and what she has learned from them, alluding to a life crisis through which she gained key insights into what learning should lead to. She ends by formulating her own definition of pedagogy. See <https://vimeo.com/202777477>

In certain cases dialogue within educational arenas can establish and maintain bonds between a teacher and a class of diverse pupils. Naima Zeijpveld stands at the door of her classroom in the vocational school De Hef in Rotterdam, welcoming her pupils at the start of the day, her voice altering affectionately in response to the personality of individual pupils. Elsewhere in the film, Naima talks about the need to engage emotionally with each pupil and with the class as a whole, and this is exactly what we see her do as she teaches English literature and language, her voice continuing to vary in modulation and her body movements staying lively. Her pupils speak about her to the camera with affection and respect similar to her manner with them, and Naima ends with a personal story that illustrates the intergenerational dimension of good education. See <https://vimeo.com/202768814>

The dialogue led by a school principal can also include greeting pupils at the door every morning but in a broader context than that of the classroom, as illustrated by Tom Brocks who leads the Titus Brandsma school (again in the Netherlands) for adolescents who will enter the higher educational streams. Grades at this school are far above the national average, yet for Tom the key point is that pupils like coming to school and are happy there because each one feels recognised for who he or she is and able to grow in her or his own way. Such a nurturing school environment has to be co-created through dialogue that is carried out more formally around the table – as with the student council – or relatively informally in corridors and classrooms. In a corridor conversation, this time with the camera,

Tom alludes to the vulnerabilities that have contributed to his sensitivity as a school principal. See <https://vimeo.com/202774894>

That children like coming to school is an important indication of success for inspired school leaders and teachers resonates in the film from the Ecole Singelijn in Brussels, in a primary school setting where young children express pleasure both through body language and vocally. Dominique Paquot, the school principal, describes how the vital dialogue between school and home is embedded in daily pedagogical practice as well as in occasional difficult conversations with parents, for example over the inclusion in class of a child with special learning needs. Dominique talks about his own reading difficulties as enhancing his sensitivity as school principal (echoing Tom Brocks in the previous film) rather than reducing his effectiveness. Teachers in the school speak – as Dominique does – of their pedagogy as a reaction to their childhood experience in conventional schools. See <https://vimeo.com/202893317>

School leadership as a dialogue about shared responsibility is exemplified by the primary school Laterna Magica in Amsterdam. School principal Annette van Valkengoed introduces us to the pedagogical principles that underpin the school's activities, after which several pupils of varying ages as well as a couple of teachers illustrate their co-responsibility in translating these principles into daily school practice. Co-responsibility spans a tapestry of myriad tasks, whether making sandwiches for the younger children or deciding on school policy. To take responsibility for any task involves demonstrating relevant abilities and experience, as when three children narrate how they qualified through job interviews to act as carers for the school pets. Mutual awareness of each one's tasks and responsibilities imbues this orchestra of co-responsibility with zest, energy and flow. See <https://vimeo.com/202771191>

## Conclusion: meaning and purpose as embedded in dialogue and narrative

Meaningful conversations about good education – as noted earlier – require an inevitably subjective exchange of views and perspectives on the moral dimensions of education, staying as close as possible to the situational complexity of educational practice. Such conversations should ideally take the form of dialogue rather than debate or confrontation. Each of the films described above constituted such a dialogue, whether between:

- children and their learning environment,
- pedagogy and lived experience in a teacher's life,
- diverse adolescents in a vocational school and a teacher who lets them know that she truly cares,
- a school principal and the school environment that he hopes to render as responsive and meaningful as possible for pupils,
- teachers and their principal who share a vision of a school setting that is far richer than the narrow pedagogy they themselves experienced as children, or

- members of a school community who together constitute an orchestra of shared responsibility for joint life-broad learning.

All six short films together could be seen as entering into a larger implicit dialogue among themselves about the many faces and dimensions of good education, feeding into the wider dialogue at the symposium about what lies at the heart of teacher – pupil relationships and at the heart of school leadership – towards providing the fertile ground of significant relationships that can nourish each schoolchild’s sense of meaning and unique life purpose.

### Background to this article:

The films of inspiring everyday practice in schools that were highlighted in this article were produced by Nickel van der Vorm and Merel Boon of NIVOZ.

The protagonists in the films – Marianne Rongen, Marta Zorrilla, Naima Zeijpveld, Tom Brocks, Dominique Paquot and Annette van Valkengoed (names are given in the order in which the film segments were discussed in the article) and also Maaïke Nap who writes elsewhere in this issue – were interviewed at the symposium by Luis Manuel Pinto of the Learning for Well-being Foundation and Hartger Wassink of NIVOZ. These interviews can be found on audio-track via this webpage/link:

<http://nivoz.nl/4835-2/unfolding-human-potential/videoclips-and-interviews/>

Summaries of the interviews by Carm Barten who studies pedagogical theory at the University of Amsterdam can also be found there.

Related reflections are provided by [Linda O’Toole](#) and [Daniel Kropf](#) who represent the Learning for Well-being Foundation and [Luc Stevens](#) on behalf of the NIVOZ Foundation, the two organisations that co-hosted the ‘Unfolding’ symposium.

On the [symposium’s website](#) you will find participants’ views and insights, video talks, audio-tracks, drawings, pictures and much more, in the subpages in the right column of the website.

Maaïke Nap who featured in the seventh film (not covered in this article) gives her perspective on dialogue and narrative in the article that follows.

### Authors

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