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## What Lies at the Heart of Teacher Education? Boxes Within Boxes, Worlds Within Worlds, Seeing and Being Seen

By Maaïke Nap

### Introduction

As a teacher educator, I tell trainee teachers that their starting point should be each pupil – not the lesson plan, nor the books.

Try and see the encounter in the classroom, I urge them, from the perspective of the individual pupil as you engage with her or him. How does the pupil experience this moment within education, in the here and now? What experiences and emotions has he or she brought from the world outside and what perceptions are uppermost in her or his mind today as the lesson proceeds?

These questions – I could explain to trainee teachers, if I were to think aloud in their presence – are questions that I am asking myself right now with respect to all of you, because I have to try to be your role model in this. My relationship to you provides a sort of mirror image of your relationship to pupils in the classrooms where you carry out your practice lessons and where you will one day be fully qualified teachers. I ask you about your needs and intentions and the dreams that you bring to your education here and I hope that this will move you to ask the same of pupils in classrooms. (Such a relationship resembles the Chinese boxes that fit inside each other – my relationship with trainee teachers encompasses their relationship with pupils in their classes.)

Tremendous courage is required if you take each individual pupil as a starting point, because this is an exploration of the unknown -- you have to let go of the lesson plan as the map that you can be certain of because you created it and you know it thoroughly. You become vulnerable, as you enter into dialogue and shared reflection, as you search

together for answers, as you acknowledge doubts and uncertainties and sometimes even failure. I bring myself as a whole person to classroom encounters in order to encourage trainee teachers in turn to engage as whole persons so that they will in the future reach out to their pupils as whole persons. This is my experience of worlds within worlds – the worlds of individual children, of individual trainee teachers and of individual teacher educators. Often treated as separate worlds, they can and must interlock through moments of open human contact.

### 'Do you see me?'

One of the exercises with trainee teachers that I like to use is to ask them to form small groups and to discuss a video clip that zooms in on one particular child within a classroom. The trainee teachers share with me their perceptions of the child, after which they inevitably ask me if they were 'right' and if their impressions were 'correct.' I tell them that there are no correct answers and that the essence of being a teacher is to relate to each child as a being in himself or herself, with an unfolding meaning and purpose that is distinctive to her or him alone.

This however was not my own experience from my time as a pupil in school. We were expected to work in silence and as individuals, and my school report cards were full of complaints that I was too talkative. Secondary school only increased my feeling of not being 'seen' by my teachers as a person in my own right. When I graduated from school, my teachers asked me what profession I planned to go into and they were startled by my answer – 'A teacher.' They expected that answer from model pupils who sat in the first row and dutifully noted down all that the teacher said, without chatting with classmates or exchanging silly notes with them as I did.

Yet I was sure that I wanted to be a teacher, at the same time that I rejected the prevalent model of 'a good teacher' and 'a good pupil.' From early on, my mother remembers, when people asked me about my future plans my reply was that I would become a teacher and a mother. As a child, I loved to enact scenes from home and school with dolls.

I was fortunate that my parents did 'see' me for who I was, from my early years onwards. They did the same for my brother as well. When he did not excel academically, they refrained from pressurising him to work harder at school. Instead they found activities outside school that encouraged his interest in art and craftwork. Today he has found his place within the profession of design.

Similarly, when I graduated from university, my parents brought to the celebration a book they had compiled of poems I had written as a child and a collection of my playful notes to classmates. I tell trainee teachers that they have to learn to 'read' each individual child as a distinctive person. My parents' compilation of my poems was an expression of how they had truly 'read' me.

## Home and school

When I left home to train as a teacher, I moved from the town where I had grown up to the city of Nijmegen (where I have lived ever since). Residing in a small student room was more than compensated for by the wide horizons of pedagogy that teacher training opened up for me. I felt confirmed in my choice of profession despite my difficulties as a pupil in secondary school.

My subdued rebelliousness in school made me sympathetic to children who were considered 'troublesome.' As a trainee teacher, I worked with groups of children who had been given this label. I tried to 'read' each one of them. I talked with one boy until I realised that his restiveness in class was related to the closely printed pages of his mathematics book. I created an alternative book of maths exercises for him, with only one sum to work out on every page. This took me considerable time, and the boy's changed attitude to maths and to school more generally was truly rewarding.

After teacher training, I studied 'Family pedagogy' at the University of Nijmegen. Children do not experience school and home as separate worlds, and both teachers and parents can only 'read' a child fully if their perspective integrates home with school. As a teacher educator I have learned a lot from my two sons and from my husband who teaches in a Montessori school.

My four-year-old son can be frustrated and angry when events do not go according to plan. I have no magic formula to offer him. I can only support him in finding small steps that can help him move forward from frustration. 'How can I help you?' I ask him. I was happy when he responded, 'If you stay calm, that helps me.'

His older brother is seven-years old and full of questions about the school system. Why is his class divided into three reading groups according to ability? When the national tests are taken in the classroom, why does his class have to work as individuals and why is helping each other strictly forbidden? 'Helping people is something we should do, isn't it...?'

A new generation of pupils and parents have stimulated change in classrooms and schools, so that my memories of life in school are no longer true for my sons. Parents are not ready anymore to leave children at the school door in the morning and then collect them from the door at the end of the school day. At my sons' school – admittedly based on non-conventional pedagogy – the school week opens and closes with parents present in the classroom.

## The world beyond

After my university studies and before I took up employment, I travelled for five months in Thailand, Indonesia and that region. I knew that my life and work would be in the Netherlands, and I wanted to glimpse the wider world. I had no formal study plan for my travels, but children were very visible in the countries that I visited. I was intrigued to note the similarities between the games that children played in cultures that were familiar to me

as well as those that were very distant. Most striking were the abilities of children in the region to entertain themselves and each other for long periods in activities that had strong learning potential, on the basis of very few material objects and in informal groups of mixed ages. Later, Peter Gray's book *Free to Learn* brought this back to me.

I too found it liberating to travel with a bare minimum of material things, just one set of clothes on my body and a clean set in my backpack. I am able to recreate this experience for my family when we camp in the European countryside in the summer, living in a tent with as few things as possible and enjoying the natural environment as fully as we can, with my sons' play resembling that of the children I saw in Thailand and Indonesia.

When I returned to the Netherlands, I was happy to be employed at the institution where I had trained as a teacher, and my task was to observe and guide trainee teachers during their practice lessons in schools. This was an opportunity to give each such trainee teacher the feeling of being 'seen' as a person developing a feel for the chosen profession of working with children in schools, and not as someone being forced to conform to the single template of 'a good teacher' that was applicable to every trainee. I was not much older than the teacher trainees that I worked with and I think that this enabled an open relationship. When I meet these former trainees, they still speak warmly of the written observations that I provided after their practice lessons. I hope that the experience has given them a sense of being seen that they will share with their pupils.

## The pedagogical moment

In due course I joined the faculty and was given responsibility for teaching pedagogy, a role that continues until today. I introduced exercises such as the following one, captured here on film:

Trainee teachers look into each other's eyes – in pairs – in order to fully experience what it means to see, to be seen, to show oneself and to feel that one is being truly seen by another. The ensuing discussion among trainees then broadens the perspective beyond eye contact, to the establishment of significant intuitive connections between teacher and pupil. See <https://vimeo.com/202752047>

I try and integrate my classes in pedagogy with the teaching of other subjects, with collaboration proving more effective when colleagues share the perspective that teacher education goes far beyond the mastery of content to developing sensitivity to each child in the classroom. My collaboration with the drama teacher, for example, allows the here and now in individual experience to come alive within our shared class. An integrated curriculum draws separate subjects together in a wholeness that can fully support trainee teachers in their learning processes and that should resonate with respect and openness for the individuals who are learning.

Some trainee teachers come to class with the intention of 'learning as much as possible,' which equates to leaving at the end with their exercise books full of notes. Once during a class I asked trainee teachers to grade at various moments how involved they were with

what was going on in class. When they showed their 'graphs' to me, they expected that I would compare it with the norm. I then explained that there is no norm and that each pupil in their classroom will have an individual trajectory of engagement with the proceedings during the class. A valuable discussion followed, during which the trainee teachers realised that patterns of involvement and temporary inattention had less to do with the merits of the class that I was presenting than with individual rhythms and preoccupations. They identified their different patterns with skills and insights that rendered them my colleagues in shared learning, through teamwork that was very different from conventional teacher-student hierarchies. Such an exercise opened their eyes to possible patterns of attention and inattention among their prospective pupils. This is an example of what I call the 'pedagogical moment,' of learning together that includes my continuing education, allowing me too to show vulnerability in an environment within which mutual trust has been built so that I can share my hesitations when moving forward with the trainee teachers.

Education is not about learning the 'right' answers. It is about paying attention to and valuing people's diverse learning processes, stimulating a dialogue between the learner and his or her environment. The teacher educator's contribution is to trust in the different potential that every trainee teacher – and every pupil in a classroom – brings with her or him, and to ensure that each person feels recognised in who they are and what they bring in their distinctive rhythms based on individual experience and interests. Pedagogical concepts are best absorbed when a trainee teacher can relate them to life experiences that touch the emotions. Learning is not imposed from outside but comes alive within, when both student and teacher take shared responsibility for the situated learning process and when both are fully present as whole persons, alert and sensitive to the possibilities of the moment, responding to questions and to the human being behind the questions. Teachers (and teacher educators) accompany each learner on her or his unique journey of unfolding potential, stopping together occasionally to consult or to draw attention to the moment, asking questions of each other and continually seeking new questions.

(Maaïke was a key participant in the Unfolding conference that is the subject of the previous article in this issue. Dutch readers can follow Maaïke's ideas further in <http://www.scienceguide.nl/201706/uitnodigen-tot-ontwikkeling.aspx>)

## Author

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