

No Education without Hesitation: Exploring the Limits of Educational Relations

Introduction¹

In a publication from 1894, the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) wrote that “die Wissenschaft der Pädagogik kann nur beginnen mit der Deskription des Erziehers in seinem Verhältnis zum Zögling” – which roughly translates as “the science of education can only begin with a description of the educator in his or her relation to the one being educated” (Dilthey, 1961, p. 190). In the 1930s, Dilthey’s student Hermann Nohl (1879–1960), by then professor of education at the university of Göttingen, would put the educational relation at the centre of his conception of education (see Nohl, 1963), thus making it into one of the key concepts of 20th century German educational theory (see Kron, 1989, pp. 190–210).

The idea that relations matter in education – and that they matter in a crucial and fundamental way – is difficult to contest. It is difficult to envisage education *without* relation, and in this regard, it may well be true, to quote the title from the book edited by Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin (2004), that there is indeed no education without relation. Yet to say that there is and can be no education without relation, is not entirely without risk. At a practical level the risk is that we may try to relate *too much*, that is, that we may try to get too close to our students – for example on the assumption that we need to know as much as possible about our students, about their history, their background, their identity, their feelings, their sense of self, in order to be able to teach them successfully – and therefore leave no space for something educational to happen, for the ‘event’ of education to occur (see also Caputo, 2012). Here we can take inspiration from Anton Makarenko who, precisely for this reason, refused to have any knowledge about the history of the juvenile delinquents he worked with at the Gorky Colony (see Meirieu, 2007, pp. 109–110). At a theoretical level the risk is that, by focusing too much on the relational dimensions of education, we lose sight of the gaps, the fissures, and the disjunctions, the disconnections and the strangeness that are part of educational processes and practices as well – and, more importantly, we run the risk that we lose sight of the educational significance of these dimensions.

While I do not wish to contest, therefore, that there is no education without *relation*, I wish to *add* to this that there is also no education without *hesitation*. This involves what we might call ‘practical hesitation’ – the subtle moments where we hold back, where we do not want to know, where we leave space for something to happen that is fundamentally beyond our intentions and control – and ‘theoretical hesitation’ – an awareness of the importance of those aspects of educational processes and practices that are ‘beyond’ or ‘outside’ of a common (or perhaps we should say: an all too superficial) understanding of education-as-relation. It is to the latter task that I aim to make a modest contribution by exploring what, in the title of this chapter, I refer to as the limits of educational relations.

In what follows I explore some dimensions of educational processes and practices that highlight the ‘unrelated’ and the ‘non-relational’ dimensions that emphasise separation and distance rather than connection and closeness. I will focus on three themes: that of communication, that of speech, and that of teaching. My approach will be broad more than that it will be deep, in that I aim to identify a number of arenas in which questions about the non-relational dimensions of education can be raised. My ambition, therefore, is to offer a number of starting points for further discussion, rather than that I will be able to pursue all aspects of these discussions in full detail. Before I start, however, I need to say a few things about what I am increasingly seeing as one of the most unhelpful and most imprecise words in our field – which is the word ‘education.’

The Multiple Meanings of ‘Education’

While other languages and traditions of theorising have a whole range of different words to talk ‘in’ and ‘about’ education – in no particular order: *Pädagogik*, *Didaktik*, *Bildung*, *Erziehung*, *Ausbildung*, *Unterricht*, *Lehren*, *danning*, *utdanning*, *dannelse*, *bildning*, *utbildning*, *opvoeden*, *onderwijzen*, *vormen* – the English language is seriously lacking in its ability to make meaningful distinctions. While I have no magical solution for bridging the gap between forms of educational thinking and doing that have emerged in the English language and those that have developed in other contexts and languages (for a first exploration see Biesta, 2011d), and while I would also argue that the ambition should less be one of bridging the gap than acknowledging the strangeness of each other’s vocabularies, I have found it useful to make a distinction between three domains of educational function and purpose (see Biesta, 2010a). The distinction I have suggested is between *qualification* (the domain of the transmission