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The Promise of Pedagogy

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I.

Raef Sefket, a Muslim gypsy, dictated to me the topic of this chapter. He also dictated to me the main positions. So, please, allow me first to explain about Raef Sefket and his relation to the basic promise of pedagogy. It is, unfortunately, a very short story.

Five years ago, we launched an effort for school integration and literacy development intended for the children of a very poor Gypsy settlement. Up to that day, not even one of the settlement children had ever been to school; not even one of the settlement adults was literate.

These people have lived in makeshift huts made of wood and plastic at the edge of a small northern Greek town. The settlement is almost invisible to the town residents because a large deserted and neglected area, as well as a deep canal that waters the nearby rice fields, intervenes between the city and the settlement. The settlement lies on the other side of the canal and right next to it. On its far side, the settlement borders on the busy national road. It is, in other words, a typical poor Gypsy settlement in Greece.

The effort for literacy development of the settlement children started five years ago when we began to approach the literacy development of the older children at the settlement site. Soon, when the local authorities realized that the Gypsies are indeed interested in learning and that their schooling might be a successful project, we were allowed to move to the nearest school. We continued by expanding the group with children of all ages -so that today many of the school age children are at school.

Their literacy development has been based on the teaching of human rights and on action on the part of children for asserting those rights in everyday life. As, for example, their right to have drinking water; to have electricity; to go to school; and to use their mother tongue whilst they are there.

The texts we used are of the children's own creation and they serve as very relevant and meaningful teaching materials. The children have got used in presenting this material in book form, in an open celebration on the last day of school. Apart from the children I also participate in the book presentation as an invited speaker.

In retrospect, this is less of a school celebration and more of a show; a manifestation of educational confidence and determination. It is a kind of declaration addressed to the entire community that human rights belong equally to all people and that education can teach children their rights and teach them how to claim them.

In 2001, however, we did not hold the celebration. Instead, on the last day of the school year, we, the instructors of the Education Department, bought three hundred meters of barbed wire and, along with our old and current students and their parents, we fenced the canal bank all along its settlement side - the unprotected and dangerous bank where some children had already lost their life and where four-year old Raef Sefket lost his life last April 4th 2001. Raef Sefket whose picture had decorated the children's book the year before in the chapter "Rights to health and social security". Raef Sefket who, along with every other child in the settlement, had made me personally promise that "as soon as you grow older, I'll do anything so that you go to school. And I assure you -I always say this with a big dose of exaggeration- I assure you that I know the way to make you learn everything there is to know in the world so that you can live a beautiful life".

Raef Sefket, however, did not grow old and with his death, he reminded all of us, educators and teachers alike, that for hundreds of years now we have promised children a better life through education forgetting that at times, life itself, mere survival means changing the world children live in.

For this reason, the barbed wire at the bank of the killer canal stands for a simple but basic symbolism: the promise of pedagogy becomes meaningful only if combined with our wish, ability and activity to change the world where the children come to live.

II.

I remind you that at the beginning of the twentieth century the most important book on the desk of almost every teacher was Ellen Key's book entitled *The Century*

of the Child. It was a book representative of the view prevailing in our world at the time. The view, that is, that the twentieth century would be the century of happy children and that education would decisively contribute to that. That century, as we all know now, came: with millions of victims in two world wars and countless of local wars and with so many children among the victims. It was the century that was marred by the torture of children in Auschwitz and later by the torture of children in Vietnam, in Rwanda, in Bosnia, on the streets in Latin America. *The Century of the Child* -the most sincere and well-intentioned promise of such competent educators! Yet, a promise that was denied in the most painful way.

Even today, when we educators and teachers promise the children of our time that, based on our research findings, we will manage to create an education that will give them the necessary tools in order to overcome all their problems and look forward to a happy future, we should be asking ourselves: Is this true? What have the unfulfilled promises of previous generations of teachers and educators taught us? Is the continuous accumulation of data on every single detail of the educational process an adequate condition to secure the realization of the promise we give to the next generation?

As this Conference is the first Conference of this range in the twentieth century, I believe we need to reflect on these basic issues a little more. Let us consider, therefore, the main characteristics of this world where our children are growing up. Let us think of the problems they will have to face equipped with the knowledge they will acquire at school.

Our world has been characterized by the biggest paradox, the biggest social and political scandal, humanity has ever witnessed. What I mean is that there is such an abundance of material goods produced in the world today that if they were as much as even relatively fairly distributed among individuals, there would be no human being that would be hungry; not even one that would be naked; not even one that would have no roof over his or her head. But at the same time, it is unprecedented in human history that so many people are naked; so many people are homeless; and so many people are starving to death.

This is the world in which our children are growing up. A world characterized by the deep gap between people who happened to be born on the bright side of this planet and others who happened to be born and live on its dark side. It is a gap not

necessarily identified by the geographical borders between poor and rich continents, nor with the borders between poor and rich nations -even if to a great extent it seems to follow them. It is a gap: a fault that cuts across rich and prospering countries; a social fault that predicts social earthquakes and disasters.

For this reason, let us take a minute to think about the meaning and the content of this statement: “it is the mission of education to prepare our children for a better life in this world”.

In this context, it is also interesting to see what exactly constitutes the work of educators and other scientists who take it upon themselves to improve education -in other words, what exactly constitutes the work of scientists who, with their research, promise young people a better education and, through it, a better life. Is it the kind of work that considers all previous failures and the causes of those failures and thus re-establishes the promise of pedagogy on sounder bases? Or is their work a promise such as the one educators gave children at the beginning of the twentieth century, or like my own promise to Raef Sefket all those months ago?

III.

With the term “promise of pedagogy”, I mean the very crux of most theories of education during the last four hundred years: the idea that human beings need education to be better people for themselves and society and that education can and must be the property of all people.

It is an idea that often takes the form of a revolutionary declaration, such as Comenius’ motto in his *Didactica Magna* that “we can and must teach everything to all human beings”. With this work, Comenius established the prospect of a mass school and reduced the existence or absence of such a school to two factors: political will and the corresponding political action. For this, Comenius has been called “an educator and also a reformer”¹ and his pedagogy has been seen as a means of achieving peace and general prosperity.

¹ “Comenius ist zugleich Reformator und Erzieher, und er kann die beiden Aufgaben nicht mehr voneinander trennen. Erziehen heisst dem Menschen helfen, sich zu retten, und für die Errichtung einer universellen menschlichen Gesellschaft kämpfen“. (Eugenio Garin *Von der Reformation bis John Locke*. In *Erziehung, Anspruch, Wirklichkeit. Geschichte und*

About three hundred years later, Paulo Freire characterized educators as “politicians and also artists”², thus stressing the evident: that whoever is involved in education must participate in any action that aims at changing our children’s world whenever this proves necessary.

Today, 350 years after *Didactica Magna*, we experience the constant deviation from the original vision set to us by the founders of pedagogy. What I mean is that the “school for all children” still does not exist. On the contrary, what we usually call a comprehensive school, in reality, remains a “special school for ‘normal’ children” - that is, a school for children with specific cognitive skills and often with specific social and cultural background.

One is for sure: The “school for all children” not only does not exist but it does not even constitute an aspiration for those who have the power to enforce educational reforms.

The question needs to be: is the “school for all children” the vision of all scholars involved in education? Moreover, does the concept of such a school serve as the framework in which they conduct research and assess the results of their research, as it should be?

If we consider the discourse on education that has been developed in recent years by powerful institutions, reproduced by mass media and adopted by the governments of the stronger states, we realize that the social gap I referred to earlier exists with the same characteristics in the field of education. Indeed, it is the educational gap that is to some extent responsible for the perpetuation and broadening of the social gap.

Reflecting on this discourse will soon reveal a discrepancy: most research studies on the content of the necessary changes in education point to the basic choices of the critical educators. Nevertheless, in practice, policy is dictated by ideologically grounded conservative educational concepts.

Let us see these facts:

Dokumente abendländischer Pädagogik, Bd. III, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1967, p. 42).

² *As educators we are politicians and artists - An interview with Paulo Freire*. In Budd Hall & Roby Kidd (Ed.): *Adult learning – a design for action*, Oxford: Pergamon Press 1978, p. 271-278

In the framework of this dominant discourse many people talk about the emergence of a “society of knowledge”. What they mean with this term is mainly that in the rapidly developing and profitable sectors of economy, one cannot but realize a dramatic rise in the significance of human work based on knowledge related with the traditional significance of capital.

But what kind of knowledge, the same people wonder, must education provide young people with at a time when knowledge is downgraded as to its utilitarian value within a few years?

To this question, Peter Glotz, a theoretician of German social democracy gave a very representative answer. Glotz supports the need for acquiring certain qualifications, which he calls “key-qualifications”³, including creativity, theoretical thought, autonomy, planning and analysis, great willingness for teamwork and exchange of information, flexibility and independent problem solving. These are certainly all qualifications related to contemporary forms of work in dynamic sectors of economy.

It is obvious, of course, that the wish to orient education toward the development and promotion of these qualifications involves radical changes in the content and organization of the educational system, with the most significant change being the adoption of experiential learning patterns and co-operative teaching forms, such as in projects. In other words, the educational system of the “society of knowledge” is obliged to adopt forms of learning and teaching, which have always been at the heart of critical pedagogy. I remind you that the critical educators have, from the beginning, envisioned a school that cultivates the creative, whilst being social and open to promoting cooperation by the individual -based on the idea that it is the creative individual who produces more of the social wealth and not the person who is suppressed or restricted to cruel working conditions and, finally, alienated from the product of his or her labor.

Countless educators and teachers have been accused and persecuted for this educational view in the past. Today, however, even scientific institutes of employers have come to vindicate them. The results of a relative research conducted in 1997 by

³ Glotz, Peter: *Bildungsziele für die Informationsgesellschaft*. Beitrag in der Virtuellen Konferenz *Lernen und Bildung in der Wissensgesellschaft*, 2. -13. November 1998. (http://www.bildung2001.de/beitragforum1_1.html)

the Institute of German Economy, namely, the research center of German employers, are quite telling. Assessing the answers of 763 companies, the study concludes that companies are interested in school reform. Their suggestions include more of experiential learning, teaching through projects, proximity with everyday life, and practice in social forms that reinforce cooperative skills and teamwork. They also suggest that the need for the school to move away from the banking model of education seems to be a pressing one.⁴

If such is the situation in the educational rhetoric of the dominant class -and indeed it is- then how can we explain the fact that while logic points to the left, practice of those in power persists in the right?

I am convinced this is due to two facts:

- ✚ First, that the “society of knowledge” and the corresponding educational system it produces does not include everyone -it is the society of the few and consequently, the educational system this society must create is an educational system for the few who participate in it or are necessary for it.
- ✚ Second, that the orientation of the whole educational system towards the needs of the society of knowledge would apparently mean giving up the strong ideological dogmas that have prevailed for years in the educational system and have had a certain ideological function. Nevertheless, the ruling class know all too well that abandoning ideological symbols means losing their hegemony which in turn means changes in politics.

This is why, despite all discussions about the society of knowledge and the type of school this society demands, we consistently see the conservative political powers protect and promote their ideological symbols in the field of education. The basis of their idea of education consists in encouraging competitive conditions amongst all factors of education: amongst students; amongst teachers; and amongst schools. In addition, they advocate the early diversification of students’ educational course, the creation and encouragement of elite groups in schools and educational institutions in general, the use of personal assessment tests for rejecting the integration of differently abled children and other similar practices. Overall, their proposal means denying the

⁴ See, for example, Delors, Jaques et.al.: Learning: *The Treasure Within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*, Paris 1996. Also the research studies on education conducted by DELPHI group.

idea of the “school for all children”. In other words, it means, in both theory and practice, the full opposition to the four hundred year old “promise of pedagogy”.

IV.

I want to be honest. I do not want to conceal the fact that these bureaucrats can also invoke the history of educational theories in support of their own ideas. Indeed, they can refer to very important scientists. John Locke, for example. John Locke stressed the significance of good education for the personal prosperity of individuals and of nations. At the same time, however, he diversified education according to the groups of populations: through education, high society children should and could become real gentlemen. This meant that they had to acquire the key-qualifications of that time. The poor should be satisfied with welfare constructed around the grudging strictures of “the poor law” and the “charity schools”. And for the part of the population that was considered a burden on society, “working schools” were enforced. The latter imposed a ruthless pace of work, which familiarized children with the discipline demanded by the factory and the church. This model of education is not far removed from what is being generated in contemporary society -if we allow things to evolve the way they are evolving. Back to basics means precisely that.

As educators, we position ourselves in the framework of either one or the other tradition, consciously or unconsciously, and, in so doing, we either promise or we threaten. It is clear and self-evident that even if pedagogy as the science of education has offered for years now the most beautiful of promises, we also know that promises are not given by sciences but by the people who create and develop sciences. An overview of the thousands of scientific publications on educational issues convinces us that scientists and teachers are positioned on both sides: on the side of promise and on the side of threat.

The question is, of course, why does this happen? The answer is simple: there are plenty of reasons why scientists, through their research, weave the web of pedagogy in such a way that they distance it from the big promise it symbolizes for their main motive is, eventually, the promotion of their personal career. This is secured when they co-ordinate their scientific work with the political will of the rulers.

On the other hand, there is one reason why so many of us are willing to weave the web of pedagogy in such a way that the promise of pedagogy is preserved warm and alive. This reason is more powerful than any others and it has millions of names in the entire world. For me, at the outskirts of a small northern Greek town, it had the name of Raef Sefket. I felt compelled in this chapter to share with you what Raef Sefket dictated to me, that is, what my unfulfilled promise to him and his death dictated to me.

I shared them with you as a minimal tribute to his memory but also because I firmly believe that the “promise of pedagogy” can only be fulfilled when we, educators, are willing to share with the world not only our scientific data and the results of our research but also our deep sorrow for a young child who never became a student.

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