

What political challenges await Education Nouvelle ?

At the end of October, teachers and popular education activists met in Brussels for the third Biennial Meeting of Education Nouvelle, on the initiative of CEMÉA, CRAP, FESPI, GFEN and ICEM. In the closing conference, Philippe Meirieu's speech was followed by that of Laurence De Cock, whose verbatim is given below.

I would like to take my turn to thank all those who are behind this important event, firstly because it is part of the continuity of a long history - as Philippe Meirieu reminded us. But also because we need more and more these collective moments, these moments of socialisation where we can say things frankly to each other, taking our time - these moments that are confiscated by institutions.

It's always very moving for me to be welcomed in these places, whether they are trade union courses, collective courses, pedagogical movements. Or like here at Convergence(s). It's moving to see you debate, reflect, formulate everything that concerns our fragility, our doubts, to observe you deconstruct our certainties and end up reiterating your attachment to these professions of education, in or out of school, in which we believe and which are professions that are particularly badly treated and disqualified today.

As Philippe Meirieu announced, I am going to place this speech in a rather political light, perhaps not alarmist, but at least urgent, because I think that we are at a particularly dangerous and anxiety-provoking turning point in history. I believe that we will not be able to be satisfied for long with being in isolation and rehashing our doubts and that we will have to envisage actions of a different nature, perhaps more offensive.

This is what I am going to try to show, based on a few historical elements and a past/present mirror, but also on a few quotations, gleaned here and there while attending various workshops, which I am going to sprinkle throughout my speech like "Graines d'Avenir", to use the title of the book coordinated by Laurent Bellenguez¹.

But before talking about the future, let's take a little leap into the past, ninety years ago, in 1932. On that date, the congress of the International League of Education Nouvelle was held in Nice. The context was one of rising fascism, nationalism and war, all accompanied by a world economic crisis that left thousands of families completely destitute throughout the world, including in France, and thousands of poor children in the streets.

In 1932, Célestin Freinet decided to go to this congress. A grumpy character, he went without any great illusions, anticipating a worldly moment, too far from the urgency of the moment for his taste. He travels with his group from the printing works to the school. And there he asks the following question:

For what extent, by what precise means, by which methods and according to what technicals can the Education Nouvelle hasten the coming of a new world in which the social organisation will respond to the pedagogical needs of the mass of children?²

I suggest that we take up this question again. And since the organisers of 1932 did not answer it, perhaps today, in 2022, we will be able to formulate some answers. Because we owe it to those who came before us.

1 Laurent Bellenguez (dir.), *Graines d'avenir*, Éditions cafards, 2022.

2 Laurence De Cock, *Une journée fasciste. Élise et Célestin Freinet, pédagogues et militants*, Agone, 2022.

Let's start with the first point: "Hastening the coming of a new world".

In the workshop on school failure, a colleague, after much prevarication, finally said as a matter of course: "In the end, teaching is politics". Are we ready here to take this statement head on: "Teaching is politics"?

In the gender workshop, another asked about our missions: "I don't want to contribute to reproducing injustices unwillingly. I need to understand why, without knowing it, I am helping to reproduce these injustices. [But how can I avoid becoming a militant? Indeed, if teaching is political, then how can I not become someone who indoctrinates? This is a question that ran through all the debates I attended, particularly around the concept of "emancipation", which has been mentioned a lot here.

You have revolved around a major tension: if teaching is political, then must we be careful that our practices do not encourage confinement? do not perpetuate the alienation of pupils? This is why we need to work on this concept of emancipation as a pedagogical goal. Perhaps it is time to declare that this Education Nouvelle is no longer so new, to change its name to "emancipatory education"? Why not the "International League for Emancipatory Education"?

So we must reappropriate this concept of emancipation, if only to take it back from those who are beginning to confuse it with "free enterprise", following the mantra: "Be the pioneer of your own existence"... All those neo-liberal vultures who love to hijack/divert the concepts of the social transformation left.

To take up this term "emancipation" and work on it from an educational point of view, to return to what the pedagogues of the early days of the Education Nouvelle had to say. Starting with Freinet. And to speak, as Philippe Meirieu did, of "taking risks". Emancipatory teaching means taking risks: "Teaching means taking the risk that our pupils become what we would not have wished them to be. That is emancipation. And that is the opposite of alienation.

So we can start by reversing the charge. Since we are constantly suspected of being militant in our classrooms. Since we are regularly accused of not being neutral. Since we are accused of engaging in political propaganda - as the Freinet couple were accused of doing.

So let's reverse the charge: who is indoctrinating? Us or those who speak of "inculcation"? We or those who write indigestible programmes - impossible to finish or to criticise - and who deprive pupils of the "right to think"? (To borrow a phrase from a workshop on the rights of the child).

In the workshop on the links between practice and research, I witnessed a beautiful moment. When Yves Reuter realised the virtues of mistrust. He spoke of the mistrust between researchers and practitioners. But mistrust has more general virtues. And an education in mistrust might be worth considering. An education in mistrust of the knowledge that is already there, knowledge that is transmitted in the classroom as a matter of course. An education in mistrust of a world presented as eternal.

Let's educate to mistrust so that doubt, in our students, becomes legitimate again. And that criticism becomes a right again. This is political education, but it is the exact opposite of indoctrination.

It is on this condition that we will be able to fight against all forms of confinement, that we will be able to "access the optimistic side of each of our pupils", as a colleague nicely put it in the workshop on radicalism. Even students who are thought to be completely lost. Even the "seeds of scoundrels" that Fernand Deligny spoke of.

Under what conditions is knowledge emancipatory? This is a question we have asked ourselves here. Isn't it time to take back control of what is taught in the classroom (as Bernard Charlot called for in the introduction to this biennial event)? Take back control of teaching content and reflect on what has been neglected by the Education Nouvelle: what is taught to children. Not just 'how' we teach, but what kind of knowledge we teach. To show that rational thought is the product of a scientific construction.

These are particularly important issues for tomorrow. And we must seize them to bring about a world cleansed of alienation.

In the question posed by Freinet in 1932, there was this other injunction: to respond to the "pedagogical needs of the mass of children".

Since we are here to ask questions (and to be frank), perhaps we should ask ourselves whether the Education Nouvelle has the capacity to respond to mass schooling. This is a real question.

For the Education Nouvelle today is not only the Freinet pedagogy in public schools. It is also public schools. It is also, for example, the Ecole des Roches. These schools have half a SMIC per month. And that is not mass education at all!

What do we do with this reality? What do we do with this contradiction? Which was already there in 1921. And which made Freinet particularly angry. In particular against his colleague Maria Montessori. But not only that!

This defence of the public school, of a school for the masses, was not always the first battle of the Education Nouvelle. Perhaps it is time that it became one. Because we are giving the stick to be beaten. As you know, there are criticisms of the Education Nouvelle. Some of which are legitimate.

Thus, when sociologists and pedagogues show that practices claiming to be based on the Education Nouvelle contributes to the reproduction of school inequalities, what is done with this criticism? What do we do with this criticism? It hurts a lot. When it was formulated in our workshops, some people took it badly. This is understandable. Because it is a heavy attack. Because we are obviously all convinced that we are working to fight against the production and reproduction of educational inequalities. However, we cannot dismiss out of hand the work that shows that our convictions are not enough. We have to make these analyses our own. Education Nouvelle, in its entirety, in its plurality, must be nourished more by the sociology of the child, in particular everything that sheds light on social determinations. I am thinking, for example, of the book coordinated by Bernard Lahire, *Enfance de classe*, and of the work which shows that, however benevolent we may be, the differences in proximity to school culture, to legitimate culture, vary according to the social background of the pupils.

These differences are at the origin of fractures from the earliest age between children born in working-class environments, whose codes are far removed from this legitimate culture, and those who, on the contrary, are born into families that educate them, from the first months, to recognise the colours and letters of the alphabet.

Of course, we say "all capable". But we are not magicians. There are things we cannot do alone - at least not without looking at the sociology of education.

Christine Passerieux, a nursery school specialist, has often reported this dialogue between a four-year-old girl and her teacher: "Think! - I don't know what that means... - Think in your head! - I don't know what's going on in my head...".

Among the children we welcome in and out of our classrooms, there are those who have been made aware from an early age of what is going on in their heads. And there are those for whom this concern is relatively secondary. When we work with children who do not know what is going on in their heads, we can - always unwillingly, of course - pass over the need to work with them on the 'basics' - as some people say - and give precedence to certain pedagogical devices when the preliminary work of explicitation is missing.

This is a criticism that must be made of the Education Nouvelle. It must be heard in order to fight against the unwanted effects of our practices. To get out of the sterile debates about pedagogues, anti-pedagogues, pedagogism, pedagogists and blah-blah-blah. We need to re-legitimise ourselves on that basis. What we know how to do.

In the workshop on children's rights, a colleague suggested a very stimulating idea: a debate with pupils on "What prevents me from learning? A great question for the students! Here we start to work on what is going on in their heads.

With all these criticisms, which can be upsetting, we need to ask ourselves these questions as activists of the Education Nouvelle. Are we ready to say that we are working for this little four-year-old girl and that our tasks must be carried out within the framework of a common, free, public school? Are we ready to give priority to the children who need it most? And, to do this, to be open to what is happening around us in the world, to the evils of the world?

In 1932, at the Nice congress, Célestin Freinet (who was really a troublemaker: he couldn't help it!) asked for a vote on aid for international workers' organisations, to support the unemployed in different countries. But Paul Langevin, president of the congress, did not do so. Obviously very disappointed, Freinet expressed his bitterness to Adolphe Ferrière, who was his friend: "Educators, lightmakers, are you going to keep quiet and tragically fail in your mission? »

Are we going to be silent? This will be my last point.

Are we going to be silent in the face of the repression of colleagues, some of whom are in this room? Are we going to remain silent in the face of the criminalisation of educational and trade union activism? Are we going to remain silent in the face of certain guilty compromises by the hierarchy? Are we going to remain silent in the face of the degrading material conditions in which children from working-class backgrounds are educated? Are we going to remain silent in the face of the indigence of this "neuro-sanctification" of training? Are we going to remain silent in the face of the incessant mistreatment of young people?

"A class that behaves itself. Let us remember the events of Mantes-la-Jolie. And the students who went hungry during the lockdown. It is unbearable. In fact, it is our responsibility to speak out against these situations. Obviously, this mistreatment affects children from working-class backgrounds even more. And the institution participates in this abuse. If only by giving more to those who already have everything, financially and culturally.

Are we going to remain silent in the face of the elitist, meritocratic functioning of the school, which leaves more and more children on the side of the road? Are we going to remain silent in the face of this farandole of predators of the planet, predators of wealth and knowledge? Are we going to continue to remain silent? To resist in silence? Is it not time to raise our voices?

In 1932, Célestin Freinet, whose character you now have some idea of, demanded at the Nice congress that the Internationale be sung. That was all! Naturally, but all the congresses ended with a song. Naturally, Langevin preferred a pacifist song.

But still, the Internationale (song)... You rarely get past the first verse. So I went back and read the others, especially the second. I'm not going to sing it! But I can make it sound good... :

*There are no supreme saviors
Neither God, nor Caesar, nor tribune.
Producers, let us save ourselves
Decree on the common welfare
That the thief return his plunder,
That the spirit be pulled from its prison
Let us fan the forge ourselves
Strike the iron while it is hot*

(What a wonderful definition of emancipation!)

Let us blow our own forge,
Let us strike while the iron is hot.

Laurence De Cock

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