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Like a Voice in the Wilderness? Striving for a Responsible Handling of the Educational Heritage

Abstract: This chapter deals with the themed exhibitions set up within the context of the Municipal Education Museum in Ypres. It allows the reader to gain insight in the curation as well as in the organization and planning of themed expositions (e.g., driven by personal motives, used to display scientific/research findings). Besides these museum's activities, this contribution also sheds light on how the museum was enmeshed in a bigger network of institutions – e.g., “concurring” *In Flanders Fields* (IFF) museum, local government, universities – and on the experienced difficulties/struggles while maneuvering between the various aspirations of these stakeholders. The main idea behind the exposé is how expositions in education museums should function as “instruments to think with and about the (educational) past” (historicizing approach), rather than tools that foster a naïve consumption of ready-made, simplified (hi)stories (educationalizing approach). Such conceptual, methodological, and theoretical assumptions concerning the nature of the history of education have been put forward on the international scene by the author as well as by his colleague to whom the Festschrift is dedicated. Both closely collaborated since the beginning of their career as partners to increase the importance of the history of education as part of social and cultural history. Their advisory role in the education museum in Ypres was only one aspect of this bigger endeavor.

Keywords: education museum, Ypres, themed exhibitions, educationalizing vs. historicizing approach

Introduction

In recent years, our research group – of which Frank Simon, to whom this work is dedicated, was an avowed member – has repeatedly succeeded in producing

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occasional contributions to *Libri Amicorum* or *festschrifts*. Usually an anecdote, or an event experienced together was sufficient for a suitable starting point. The rest of the chapter could then be related to one's own research, as it were, without much effort. However, as the celebrated person's professional career came closer to us, that maxim came under increasing pressure.

The latter certainly applies to what must follow. With no other researcher have I myself, in the most literal sense of the word, gone out into the world to promote and valorize the history of education in the same way as I did with Frank Simon – something which, by the way, has left me with a friendship for life. That is why I immediately accepted the instigators' offer to write "something" for Frank. But what? The innumerable hours we spent together have resulted in so many joint publications, and also left their traces in numerous collaborative research projects and resulting doctorates, in both national and international cooperative networks, including the management of the most prominent associations and journals in our field, as well as in guest lectures, research seminars and museum expertise provision at home and abroad. Listing these seems like an impossible task and is probably not all that interesting for the readers either. Moreover, both Frank and I have already been able to explain the crucial character of working together in both our curricula in other places.¹

Partners in The Development of Educational Historiography, Both Nationally and Internationally

Our collaboration began in earnest in October 1977, thanks in part to the then ongoing inter-university research project on opening up the 19th and 20th centuries educational press in Belgium, led by Maurits De Vroede. Over time, we have come to realize how essential it was for our discipline, which was under increasing pressure from the emergence and flourishing of empirical approaches in *educational research*, not to get in each other's way or, worse still, to compete with each other. But, on the contrary, as a duo, to face the opportunities at an international

¹ E.g. in interviews. Sjaak Braster and Maria del Mar del Pozo Andrés, "Frank Simon: A Personal Story of Everyday Educational Realities," *Historia y Memoria de la Educación* 8 (2018): 699–737; Simonetta Polenghi and Gianfranco Bandini, "Interview with Marc Depaepe," *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación* 3, no. 1 (2016): 445–453.

level. It carried an important legacy in the history of education research: Ghent as the cradle of *Paedagogica Historica. International Journal of the History of Education* (1961) and the starting point for the annual conferences of the *International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE)* (1978). Without wanting to attribute to us the rapprochement of these two entities, which initially treated each other with some reticence, and even with some rivalry, it is clear that our contribution in this matter in the 1990s facilitated the process.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think that this was based on a clear plan, an explicit strategy, let alone some manner of drive for international conquest. Quite the contrary. Just like our friendship, our collaboration grew spontaneously, based mainly on informal contacts in the search for usually pragmatic answers to what occurred in the everyday problems of the field. It just clicked between us as researchers, probably because on the one hand we were on the same wavelength from a theoretical-methodological point of view, and because on the other hand we were able to transform the differences in character, talent, temperament, background, style, accumulated knowledge and skills into a win-win situation – not in the economic sense of the word, of course, but more particularly in a sporting sense. Because if we had one character trait in common, it was undoubtedly the sense of teamwork. As a former top football player, Frank was used to giving “assists” rather than always wanting to score himself. Against that record of achievement, certainly from a physical point of view, I could only contribute very little, even though psychologically, as one of the twins, since my childhood I was accustomed to sharing “emotions”, in sports and games, in winning as well as losing. Furthermore, we had the common ambition to do what we did, and to do it “well”, simply because we both took an intrinsic pleasure in this. As a motto, the quote from Richard Sennett’s famous statement about historical crafts – doing a work well for the sake of the work itself – was entirely appropriate in the article in which we brought the reader along to the workplace of our historical research in education.² Last but not least, the common sense of humor, in the popular German description of *wenn man trotzdem lacht*, will also have done its work in the development of our partnership. This is how I remember the cathartic laugh when after a grueling meeting on the fifth floor of the COV building in Brussels concerning the processing of data from a historical survey on the social profile of teachers, we wanted to adjust the accompanying text quickly and suddenly saw all our data disappear before our very

² Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon, “Sources in the Making of Histories of Education: proofs, arguments, and other reasonings from the historian’s workplace”, in *Educational Research: Proofs, Arguments, and Other Reasonings*, ed. Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 23–39.

eyes. The prehistoric computer, whose orange lettering on the small screen had disappeared one by one, had packed in. What else could we do but stay behind and start all over again?

Considering the theme of this book, I suggested, from the rich range of shared experiences, only to dig out those that were related to our commitment to a meaningful handling of the educational heritage in Flanders. Which, on reflection, again caused me problems, at least if I wanted to bring new elements from our research to the surface – which was certainly the intention. In a contribution for French education museums in particular, I had already pointed out how in Flanders, and by extension throughout Belgium, consideration for school heritage is not a priority at all.³ It is true that the centenary commemoration of the First World War gave a boost to remembrance or heritage education in secondary schools, but – as we have been able to demonstrate in an article of which Frank was co-author⁴ – this had very little to do with historical research. On the contrary, in line with what the history of our profession teaches, historical knowledge is still used in a very instrumental way in most of these commemorations. It is not the intrinsic value that prevails, but the pedagogical message, which by the way must often serve as a kind of hollow rhetoric, with semi-disguised political-ideological purposes. In this sense, we have spoken of an “educationalizing” approach, whereas the innovation we tried to make in the field was precisely the connection with social and cultural historiography, which thus implied a more “historicizing” approach. And in our opinion, this not only applied to scientific research in itself, but also to the more popularizing projects in the museum sphere that Frank and I had set up from both our universities. *Educational Memory Flanders*, which we were nevertheless able to run partly with money from the Flemish government, was one of them. However, in order to obtain this support, we had to include, as it were, unrealistic objectives in the application, such as making an inventory and repertory of almost all preserved textbooks and school wall charts in Flanders – something which, despite some hopeful scientific results, inevitably encountered many material difficulties. For example, we were confronted with the closure of the *Historical Education Collection*, which was not considered a priority by the Ghent faculty (and university) involved, and which was essential for the execution of

3 Marc Depaepe, “Au bas de la liste des priorités? Quelques réflexions personnelles sur le traitement du patrimoine scolaire en Belgique,” in *Première rencontre francophone des musées de l'école. Actes Rouen 2016* (Rouen: Le Musée national de l'éducation, 2018), 65–75.

4 Karel van Nieuwenhuysse, Frank Simon, and Marc Depaepe, “The Place of History in Teacher Training and in Education. A Plea for an Educational Future with a History, and Future Teachers with Historical Consciousness,” *Bildungsgeschichte* 5, no. 1 (2015): 57–69.

our project. With a great deal of diplomacy, Frank, who in the meantime had become education director at the same faculty (of psychology and educational sciences), ensured that the wall charts could, in 1999, be contractually transferred to the *Municipal Education Museum* in Ypres, which has since fallen into disuse.

Working in Tandem as Advisors of the Municipal Education Museum in Ypres

This was why, as a contribution to Frank's friendship book, from the very beginning I thought of a piece about the history of the Ypres *Municipal Education Museum* (1990–2016), which has existed for more than a quarter of a century. For years we both sat as consultants on its "steering committee", as it was known. But that idea also caused me problems, because we had already written an article about the museum.⁵ Perhaps partly out of frustration, because in that working group we continued to plead for its continued existence. We had explained in it how the strong side of the education museum – the city's support and the cooperation with the other museums, and in particular with the *In Flanders Fields (IFF)* museum – was at the same time its weakness. It goes without saying that a utilitarian attitude to history prevailed in the context of an urban policy based primarily on tourism and economic interests, including among the most recent alderman for culture responsible for the Museum of Education. He expected the Ypres museums to prove their worth, not only in terms of the number of visitors they attracted, but also in terms of the message they proclaimed. The fact that the old museum of remembrance on the Great War, transformed in 1998 into *IFF* – a modern "peace museum" (with digital gadgets) – which had the noble mission of impressing the madness of any war upon the general public, was miles ahead of the education museum in that respect, is obvious. Even though the *IFF* did not always have to tackle this assignment for us with highly elaborate educational packages. In our opinion, wanting to take the public by the hand – including the many visiting schoolchildren – does not immediately testify to a truly emancipatory attitude.

Mutatis mutandis, this was also our approach to the education museum. In contrast to some practitioners – real "school foxes" (the word came from Frank!)

⁵ Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon, "It's All About Interpretation: Discourses at Work in Education Museums. The Case of Ypres," in *Educational Research: Discourses of Change and Change of Discourse*, ed. Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe (Cham: Springer, 2016), 207–222.

like André Durnez – who, mostly from a nostalgic view of the past, felt that the museum should promote the school as an institution, we instead aimed, through the confrontation with well-selected artefacts from the pedagogical past, for a liberating (i.e. meeting, and sometimes healing) dialogue with the past, which could perhaps culminate in what is called the sublime historical experience. Such a personal, highly individual result can of course only be achieved *a posteriori* and is certainly not intended to be consumed *en masse*. In our opinion, therefore, the task of school museums is not to learn to deal with history in an educationalized way, nor to propagate some well-intentioned message (e.g. about the necessity of school and its beneficial effects), but rather to reflect critically on the role of education in society. In this sense, in our opinion, school museums could also effectively become “laboratories” from which authentic knowledge in the history of education can be generated, including on the use of school objects over time. The school desk, to which we have devoted attention in several other articles, is a good example of this. But it did not get that far in Ypres. Our plea for a more “historicizing” and thus better-founded approach (instead of the familiar utilitarian-pedagogical line, which joins up with the pattern of expectations for an old-fashioned historical pedagogy) not only yielded far too little success, but there was clearly much more to it than that. In 2005, the education museum had to deal with a huge fire, from which it never truly recovered. Legal procedures with the insurance prevented a new look, in a sense preserving the old-fashioned-ness in the permanent exhibition, which we felt tried to show too much at once. Things got even worse when some construction promoters’ gazes fell upon the site – the former Saint Nicholas church in the city center – in which the education museum was located, which would eventually lead to its definitive closure at the end of December 2016.

Now that the emotions about this closure have subsided, it remains an interesting exercise to examine whether the material remnants of the education museum show any traces and/or results of our efforts in this respect. On the basis of the tension between the pedagogical-didactical objectives on the one hand and the actual educational effects on the other – a paradox that affects not only museums but, as we have explained elsewhere, every educational campaign and therefore every educational institution – I would like to make an attempt at this below. Awareness of this paradox among the public was, after all, one of the few educational effects we had in mind from the confrontation with the Ypres museum offering. Nevertheless, there were some problems here too. The same applies to the consultation of archives, due to the temporary inaccessibility caused by the Corona crisis. That is why this “test” of analysis – a prolegomena in the true sense of the word – is largely based on the (fortunately)

several publications⁶ (the one more prestigious than the other) in response to the various themed exhibitions in the education museum, for which, all in all, we are very grateful to the city. The rest is based on personal memories, which of course gives the whole a subjective touch. But at the end of a career and in honor of a good friend, this is quite alright.

The Tension between Educationalizing and Historicizing as Reflected in the Thematic Exhibitions

A total of twenty so-called temporary [themed] exhibitions took place at the Ypres Museum of Education, not counting the special exhibition on the history of primary education that took place ten years before the museum was founded. If both of our contributions have had any effect, it is mainly in that context, albeit only over time. Because certainly the first themes stemmed rather directly from the personal interests and ambitions of the initiators. But to claim that these exhibitions were insufficiently scientifically substantiated is not correct either. As we will see in a moment, academic expertise was called upon from the very beginning, initially in the person of the aforementioned De Vroede; and from 1991 also structurally on the advice of the undersigned, while Frank only became a member of the “steering committee” towards the middle of the 1990s. The reason for this was actually political. The Ypres aldermen’s college had a homogeneous Christian-democratic composition in the early days of the museum, and in order to satisfy the opposition (who would actually have preferred a cat museum to an education museum), Robert Barbry, the *spiritus movens* of the steering committee, suggested including a professor from a non-Catholic university. This issue became all the more urgent when, also in 1995, the city council decided to put the available space in the Cloth Hall, in which the education museum had previously found accommodation, entirely at the *IFF*’s disposal. After all, as a new location, the former Saint Nicholas church came into view, which of course increased the (completely unjustified) fear that the Ypres school museum could only become an affair for “Catholics”.

But let us return to the first temporary exhibition. It was dedicated to “female handiwork” and began in May 1990. That was also the official opening of the

⁶ In order to cope with the limits of space set by the editors, these publications (in Dutch) are not referenced, but the titles are described in the text.

Municipal Education Museum, set up in a wing of the historic Cloth Hall and architecturally conceived from the notion of a Fröbelian box of blocks. None other than the then Minister of Education was invited to that opening: Daniel Coens, West Fleming and Christian Democrat. Through the CVP, his political party, he maintained good relations with the initiator Bertha Van Elslande, party colleague and first female deputy of the province of West Flanders, responsible for culture. She and her husband, Georges Platteau, a former teacher and former alderman for culture of the city of Ypres, obviously of the same political leaning as his wife, were involved in the creation of the collection, not only of the temporary exhibition, but of the permanent one as well. In 1980, on the occasion of Belgium's 150th anniversary, it was they who had convinced the mayor, the College of Aldermen and ultimately the entire municipal council to show some consideration for the history of Belgian primary education through an exhibition in the famous Cloth Hall (where the education museum was to be established ten years later). After all, every Belgian city council was expected at the time to take up an initiative as part of the country's 150th anniversary. And as both have told me repeatedly, the argument by which they were able to convince the mayor to set up that exhibition was the promise that it would not cost much . . . after all, they had already collected a lot of material themselves. Nonetheless, through the inspectors Durnez and Barbry, contact was also made with the University of Leuven. Through a publication on the internal history of Belgian primary education, they came to me with the question of whether material could be derived from our History of Education Department – a question which, given my status at the time, I immediately passed on to my head of department and supervisor, Professor De Vroede, who knew how to inspire great awe in almost all of Ypres. The city's exhibition, which of course also zoomed in on local conditions, was a great success, to such an extent that one began to dream of a permanent school museum . . . De Vroede, who immediately seemed to want to combine the idea with some potential doctoral research on the local history of education, also played a catalyzing role in this context. But, partly due to the financial impact, it took ten years before that dream came true. Meanwhile, Platteau was no longer an alderman for culture, but there was also a different mayor.

The fact that female handiwork had become the theme of the opening exhibition in 1990 was mainly due to the beautiful collection that Bertha had amassed, although perhaps there was more going on there too. Would she, as a female politician who had had to work her way up in a world that, back then, was still almost completely male-dominated, not have experienced at first hand just how important “equal opportunities” were? And was it therefore necessary for her, despite sometimes very traditional and conservative views on hierarchy and authority from a social perspective, to dwell for a moment on the silent

witnesses of the sex-specific education of yesteryear? Or, on the other hand, was she driven solely by nostalgia, for a world in which the Catholic Church was literally central and “order” inevitably led to God, as on one of the sewing threads shown, which had subsequently acquired a perpetual place in the education museum’s personal collection? As Barbry later testified, the female handiwork in primary schools and boarding schools was not only meant to teach sewing, lacemaking, putting on stockings, knitting and so on, but also to be an exercise in the love of work, order, discipline, and cleanliness.

Willingly or unwillingly, the second themed exhibition, which was organized only the following year, was also in keeping with the idea of equal opportunities, but viewed as emancipating the people. Under the impetus of this same Barbry, it looked more closely at the phenomenon of folk literature and thus, in a sense, complemented the very first exhibition on the history of primary education. We saw how, outside of school, Jan with his cap could have developed more through all kinds of prints, songs, stories, newspapers, pamphlets, cheap novels, and the like. However, there is no comprehensive catalogue of this exhibition either, in which possible objectives, let alone possible effects, were discussed.

The subsequent temporary exhibition, in 1992, was explicitly supported by scientific research for the first time. The starting point of this exhibition, which was entitled “Church, catechism and lace”, was Roos Herpelinck’s doctorate on the diocese of Ypres during the three decades before the French Revolution. It is obvious that this research was particularly interesting for local historiography. It was therefore published in 1991 by the West Flemish Local History Association. The education museum even devoted an international study day to it. The focus of the exhibition was on the renewed grip of the (Catholic) Church on education, through the establishment of, for example, schools for the poor and Sunday schools. One of the pioneers in this field was the Ypres clergyman Jan Bartolomeus Van Roo, whose charitable work reached far beyond the boundaries of the diocese. The permanent collection rightly had some consideration for this as well. However, possibly due to the lack of relevant sources, not all questions of interest for educational historiography were resolved by this. Such studies of religious life in the early modern period had little consideration for the problems caused by the gap between educational goals and their effects. Usually, they based themselves on the normativity of church precepts, without much concern for the reality of everyday life. It is striking, for example, how many times Herpelinck uses the verb “must” in describing the first statutes of the diocese of Ypres with regard to education.

A much clearer link with the ongoing educational historiography was offered by the 1993 theme exhibition on “The School for Life”. The concept came from

De Vroede, who also provided the introduction to the catalogue as first published, while its practical development was once again Barbry's responsibility, albeit assisted by Jan Dewilde, curator of the urban museums. De Vroede, whose general aim was to make the link between history of education and social history, described how innovations related to economic development on the one hand, and social issues on the other, have led to adjustments and/or innovations in primary schools. School savings, anti-alcohol propaganda, animal protection and consideration for economic expansion through Belgian Congo were just a few examples of this. De Vroede concluded that the school was not expected to carry out a social reform mission, but rather a conservative one. In contrast to this down-to-earth observation, the "foreword" by Frans Lignel, the then alderman for culture (and son-in-law of the aforementioned Platteau-Van Elslande couple), turned out to be an ode to the teacher's "vocation": "the Education museum in its general concept and this temporary exhibition, focused on a limited period of time, aims to pay homage to all those who have worked to educate their people, a basic requirement for a better future. Their inventiveness knew no bounds. Teaching was a vocation first and a job second." Whether everyone in the working group subscribed to this general objective of the museum is, of course, highly questionable. The picture of the profession outlined therein can also be critically contested. After all, this seems to be based on an idealized vision of the past rather than on any historical reality – which, as it happens, we also tried to demonstrate in the very same year, along with De Vroede.

Such contradictions in the discourse with which history was approached came even more starkly to the fore in 1994, when the temporary exhibition was about Congo, our former Belgian colony. This was clearly a much more sensitive subject, since at the same time genocide was taking place in neighboring Rwanda, a former Belgian mandated territory, in which Belgian soldiers had also been murdered. This time the impetus for the exhibition came from myself. As part of an ongoing research project, we wanted to show the public, on the one hand, what education was provided by Belgians in the Congolese colony, mainly through Catholic missions, and, on the other hand, how the colony was discussed in our education. Hence the title: "Congo, a second Fatherland. The Colony in Education and Education in the Colony (1908–1960)", which also the title of the introduction in a brochure of the same name. In anticipation of the book to be published the following year on Belgian education in Congo, the exhibition emphasized the patronizing nature of the colonial educational system. With a nod to Lea Dasberg, the last two sentences of my introduction read as follows: "The natives were still regarded by the average settler as servants who did not need too much knowledge or insight. And despite the fact that thousands of missionaries gave it their all, education in the colony all too often

meant ‘raising by keeping small’. Although those words were carefully weighed up, their critical tone still went down badly with some visitors. Even within the steering committee, in addition to congratulations from some, I also had to deal with some negative remarks from others about style and content. They alleged that I was wrong to have railed against the Catholics and against the royal family. Fortunately, in the scientific world of educational historiography, this was perceived in a completely different way. The exhibition did not go unnoticed there. The Belgian-Dutch Association for the History of Education even organized a study day on the subject.

The subsequent temporary exhibition was four years in the making. However, this had nothing to do with the discussions above, but rather with the fact that the decision to move the Museum of Education had been made in the autumn of 1995 and in the meantime a new location had to be found. On 13 July 1997 the museum closed its doors in the Cloth Hall and on 16 May 1998, amidst great interest, it reopened in the Saint Nicholas Church, which also happened to have much more space to display things. Perhaps that was why the original and rather more playful and thematic structure had to give way to a largely historical-chronological line. Such a narrative, from the Middle Ages to the present day, with accents far beyond the *local color* of Ypres, was said to be most appropriate for a wide audience. At the same time, the working group launched a new temporary exhibition that was just as much of a hit with the public: “War and peace in education” – an initiative that presented itself as an educational-historical complement to the *IFF* that had just opened (Figure 1). The exhibition also attracted a great deal of international interest. In the summer of 1998, the annual *ISCHE*-conference was organized in Kortrijk. The program included a collective visit to both Ypres museums, which incidentally led to emotional scenes among the participants (such as the conciliatory gesture made by Richard Aldrich and Max Liedtke in response to the search for both their relatives, who had fought each other in the war). The catalogue, in a more professional layout than the previous one, was again the work of Barbry, who also wrote the introduction. The whole steering committee signed up for the collection of the material. It is true that, at the end of the introduction, a connection was made with the idea of peace that was propagated by the *IFF*, but that seemed to be a polite formula rather than an objective. The tone of the introduction was much more detached and based on historical facts on education.

This was also the case in 1999. What is more, the temporary exhibition at the time was reconnected with ongoing research. Karl Catteeuw, who since late 1996 had been working at the “archive and documentation center for the history of education” at KU Leuven, became an assistant to the same research unit in October 1998, tasked with writing a PhD on school wall charts. That dissertation was only to be published in 2005, but this did not prevent the author from



Figure 1: Municipal Education Museum, Ypres: Exhibition poster 1998.

presenting his research results as early as 1999. Incidentally, the year before, Catteuw had put together a mini-exhibition on the same subject in response to the aforementioned *ISCHE* meeting on the Kortrijk campus of KU Leuven. As explained in the introduction to the once again beautifully published Ypres exhibition catalogue, the wall chart was the didactical medium par excellence, with which primary schools tried to achieve several of their pedagogical objectives in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. One of them – and this was explained in detail in the exhibition – was the need to strengthen Belgium’s “national” identity through historical education. This was done using several wall charts that denounced the centuries of “foreign domination” of the Belgians and presented Independence, in 1830, as a redemption. There was no doubt that there was such a thing as a Belgian identity. The confrontation with the Romans, with Julius Caesar’s legendary description of the *Belgae* as the bravest

of the Gauls as an honorary title, seemed the best proof of this. This scene was therefore extensively depicted. It was also behind the choice of the title “Barbarians in the classroom”, whereby Catteeuw hurried to note that barbarians did not refer to some inferior tribe, but had to be read in the sense of Homer, i.e. as foreigners who spoke a different language.

It was not educationalized in any sense. Rather the reverse: the confrontation with historical school wall charts gives visitors the opportunity to see how cultural identity is a product of history, and the extent to which primary schools have played a key role in shaping that discourse. This is something that was probably quite necessary in times of rising populism and nationalism, not only in Flanders but throughout Europe.

Mutatis mutandis, the same can be said of the 2000 theme exhibition. It dealt with the history of pre-school education and bore the title: “from nursery to preschool, or the progression of infancy in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries”. This linked in with the research from both our universities, which Frank and I not only lectured upon, but also had theses written. In our joint introduction (for another prestigious catalogue edition) we pointed out, among other things, how the justified call for consideration for small children could also lead to continued pedagogy, while this would not necessarily involve complete personal development. As in the past, many of the innovations, often announced with much fanfare, were de facto aimed at little more than the socialization of the child, through school, in contemporary patterns of expectation.

Frank Simon’s next temporary exhibition, which was not to take place for another two years, focused on the materiality of the museum objects. It was entitled “engraved in the memory. Icons of primary education from the *Ancien Régime* until now”. There was no catalogue, but there was a well-tended “walking guide”, which also happened to refer to the history of the museum (Figure 2). It was developed by two students from Ghent, Bieke Quaghebeur and Loes Vandromme, who had worked with the steering committee as part of their internship, as well as by the aforementioned Catteeuw, an assistant in Leuven, and now also a member of that steering committee. It is no coincidence that the school desk was mentioned as the first of these icons. A school museum without a school desk is simply unimaginable. This was why we returned later on in more than one co-authored article to this furniture specifically designed for education.⁷ On the one hand, we drew attention to the life cycle of these. In this

7 Frederik Herman, Angelo Van Gorp, Frank Simon, and Marc Depaepe, “The School Desk: From Concept to Object,” *History of Education* 9, no. 1 (2011): 97–117; Marc Depaepe, Frank Simon, Frederik Herman, and Angelo Van Gorp, “Brodskys hygienische Klappschulbank: zu leicht für die schulische Mentalität?” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 58, Beiheft (2012): 50–65; Marc

way, the move to a school museum can be considered a kind of *after-life*. And on the other hand, we kept in mind designers, patents and the chances of success for new-fangled gear, such as Oscar Brodsky's folding desk. This was partly in the hope that the integration of these dimensions could also promote a more dynamic approach to the statistical character of the benches on display in the museum. Even though – admittedly – this was not always easy to visualize. Nevertheless, that themed exhibition was founded upon scientific inspiration this time too.



Figure 2: Municipal Education Museum, Ypres: Exhibition 2002.

Depaepe, Frank Simon, and Pieter Verstraete, "Valorising the Cultural Heritage of the School Desk Through Historical Research," in *Educational Research: Material Culture and Its Representation*, ed. P. Smeyers & M. Depaepe (Cham: Springer, 2014), 13–30.

This was also the case in 2003. Bert De Munck, now a professor of early modern history at the University of Antwerp, was called upon for the occasion, partly through Frank's contacts at the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*. He received his doctorate in Brussels in 2002 for a research project on apprenticeship in the Southern Netherlands (1500–1800), for which Hugo Soly was the supervisor (and Frank was one of the co-supervisors). Soly therefore wrote the “foreword” to the widely published catalogue for the temporary exhibition of 2003, for which De Munck signed up along with Dominiek Dendooven, a scientific research associate at the *IFF*. Its title was: “Learning through doing. Apprenticeship and trades in the Ancien Régime”. The idea behind it was, among other things, to investigate the genesis of the formation of “skills” – something that was not without significance in the debate at the time about competences acquired elsewhere as an alternative to school education. This was probably why Soly made the link with “reflections on contemporary issues, in particular regarding the relationships between socio-economic changes and teaching formats”. Without becoming ahistorical, De Munck returned to this in detail in his highly elaborate introduction. At the end, he subtly concluded that: “after all, an open yet critical view of the past broadens our view of the present. Only history teaches at one stroke both how today's reality has grown and how the impression of it was created. By confronting both, we learn about the past and the present”. Whether all the visitors – including the city's administrators – understood it like this, however, is highly questionable. When rereading this text, which from a scientific point of view is of very high quality, but at the same time quite a tough text, it becomes clear that De Munck used the catalogue as a vehicle for an extensive summary of his doctorate, which in the end was not equally appreciated by everyone. Perhaps this had already provided a breeding ground for the aversion of certain administrators to our view that the education museum should provide a forum for the results of scientific research. In any case, this reprimand, often half hidden or half restrained, would come to the surface more than once in the later debates on the future of the museum.

Be that as it may, with the 2004 temporary exhibition that problem did not arise. For all kinds of pragmatic reasons, the steering committee opted for an ease-of-use solution, although this did cost a relatively large amount of money. They hired the rights of the famous French photographer Robert Doisneau and exhibited thirty of his coastal and, by their everydayness, touching school photographs. With a rather nice title of: “Fingers full of smudges. Impressions of school life 1930–1960”. The same trick – hiring a theme exhibition (but cheaper this time) – was repeated three years later, in 2007. Then, under the title “Back to school!”, the recruitment posters for the education of Herman Verbaere (1905–1993) came into the spotlight. For the very limited catalogue, Barbry,

chairman of the steering committee, wrote the foreword, while Karl Scheerlinck took care of the text. The posters came from a private collection in Antwerp.

However, this had not yet brought an end to the scientifically founded events. In 2008, the following year, Marieke Breyne (daughter of the West-Flemish honorary governor and former mayor of Ypres), a student whose supervisor was Frank, had the opportunity to present the results of her licensed dissertation on the history of educational puppetry to the public in yet another luxurious catalogue: “curtain open, mouths open. Dolls and puppetry in education”. This included a shift in pedagogical objectives: from a highly normative tool for moral education in the first half of the 20th century to a more differentiated whole for emotional and social development. However, it also pointed to the often implicit moralization of new-fangled forms.

And as early in 2005, the year after the exhibition of Doisneau’s photographs – lest we forget – Karl Catteeuw had been given the opportunity to return to his now completed research on the wall charts. In nicely published catalogue *Wall Charts on all Sides. Research into School Wall Charts for Primary Education in Belgium*, he sketched a picture of their use in the classroom and also paid attention to their construction. In this way, he fulfilled some of the expectations that we formulated with regard to the school bench, that other icon from educational memory.

Leuven’s doctoral research would then be the subject of three more temporary exhibitions. In 2009, when Pieter Verstraete and his supervisor Walter Hellinckx received a forum for their study on “the origins and development of education for children and young people with disabilities”. In 2010, when Carine Steverlynck, as a distant offshoot of her doctorate on child abuse and the resulting publications on sexuality, drew attention to “the big secret. Dealing with physicality and sexuality in upbringing and teaching during the 20th century” – a theme which, by the way, could easily be linked to the scandals of child abuse in the Catholic Church at the time – something of which Frank, however, being far from a churchgoer himself, was certainly no major fan owing to the potential a-historicity. Finally, in 2013, when Jan Van Wiele reported his research on “the history of the representation of several major non-Christian religions in Belgian Catholic religious education by means of textbooks (1870–200)”. Although this initiative was in line with the global interest in historical textbook research, for which school museums almost everywhere were highly regarded, the impressive footnote apparatus and the scientific language in which the admittedly relatively short introduction was made, will again have deterred more than a layman in the matter.

This was probably not the case with the easier to digest exhibitions of the year before and the year after. In 2012, a literally and figuratively “cheap” exercise was

chosen, especially some of the recent acquisitions. As a speaker, I tried to bring some order to this chaos through our ideas regarding a yet to be refined “historical school theory”, but unfortunately I only had one page to explain this in the very modest walking guide that was to accompany the visitor. The underlying reason for this lack of attention was that the Ypres city council, in view of the centennial commemorations of the First World War that were coming up, did everything in its power to give the *IFF* a new look. The museum staff had no time left to concern themselves with the education museum. As a result, in 2014, the ultimate remedy for a hired photo exhibition was taken: that of Annemie Van Gemert on school uniforms.

But that was not the end of it. The focal point of the education museum had to lie equally in the war commemoration. Immediately, we realized that this would also be its swansong. In our joint article on the education museum, to which we referred at the beginning, and for which, in 2014, a Spanish congress on the care of educational patrimony had been the real reason,⁸ we had therefore made an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the museum. When the prestigious catalogue for the 2016 theme exhibition was due to be published and we were invited to introduce it, we thought it would be a good idea to include this text. It would be evidence of intellectual maturity, since criticism of remembrance education, the underlying motives of which are usually misunderstood, was not spared. But that was, in a manner of speaking, overlooked. The opposition from the city camp and the museum staff, who of course sided with the thriving and flourishing *IFF*, was so great that we finally delivered a purified version of that text, in which all possible negative allusions to the policy had been removed. By the way, we got sick of the whole thing, when I noticed in the proof, that the title we had proposed had been changed *in extremis*, and I myself (consciously or unconsciously?) no longer appeared in the list of editors of the book. The latter was rectified at the last minute, albeit not in the usual alphabetical order, but there was no further response on the former. The final title remained “to school in wartime? Belgian children going to school, 1914–1919”, while our initial proposal had been “education is everywhere, even in wartime”. With this, we were aiming to emphasize the almost universal nature of the *schooling society*. Even in periods of extreme difficulties –

⁸ Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon, “Sobre el Futuro del Pasado de la Educación: Museos de la Enseñanza y su Relación con la Historia de la Educación – El Caso de Ypres,” in *Pedagogía Museística. Prácticas, Usos Didácticos e Investigación del Patrimonio Educativo. Actas de las VI Jornadas Científicas de la Sociedad Española para el Estudio del Patrimonio Histórico Educativo (SEPHE)*, ed. Ana M. Badanelli Rubio, María Poveda Sanz & Carmen Rodríguez Guerreiro (Madrid: Universidad Complutense, Facultad de Educación, 2014), 35–43.

such as war (but also today in the fight against the Corona crisis) – one cannot do without the institution of school (even if that education now has to be done digitally, this is done through the teachers who pass on the subject matter to the pupils . . .). This message about the persistent school processes in our culture had apparently not been understood, as the question mark in the final title might suggest.

Conclusion

If we look at the evolution described above from some distance, maybe we should not be so dissatisfied after all. Ypres has given us the opportunity to bring much of what we have researched together scientifically to a wider audience. It included the topics we were working on ourselves, with themes for doctoral and/or master's students later on. Not wanting to underestimate the audience was a conscious choice on our part. Certainly, we had made it easier for ourselves by surfing the more popular, and therefore also more attractive and lucrative trends of entertainment and easy consumption. For example, by luring entire buses of elderly people to the museum and immersing them there in the melancholy of childhood memories through active role play in "historical" education; or by giving visiting school children, often on a school trip to the museum, an unforgettable journey into the past through the same role play. With the obvious, underlying message "how well they have it now compared to the past", not only in society but also at school. After all, pedagogy is moralizing – also that of the apparently innocent school outings. And we have declined to convey such messages, not only because they usually lead to a misuse of history, but also because they are usually very ahistorical. In that sense we may remain to sound like a "voice in the wilderness" because we trust that those who want to understand and interpret, can do so – at their own discretion, without the help of specific didactic or pedagogical programs and arrangements. And if we, possibly together with our involved PhD students, have learned something through the confrontation of our so-called "too scientific" and "too rational" attitude with the more pragmatic aspirations of the museum management, it will be (again and again) in the field of the methodological and theoretical self-awareness: the constant attention to the often hidden agendas in our own discourse, also at an educational or museum level. What finally matters to us in history, and *a fortiori* in its visualization in museums, can be summed up in Spinoza's words: we have labored carefully not to mock, lament, or execrate human actions, but to understand them.

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