

School: Everyone Can Learn Everything

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Utopia as Impossible Reality

Envisioning the future of schools is a topic of high relevance. Speculating about this topic does not seem to require a lot of imagination.¹ New media and technologies provide ample clues to outline a future: the tablet school, schools offering or adjusting personalized learning environments and student trajectories based on learning analytics, or the virtual, online school allowing for ubiquitous learning. On the basis of what is (technically) possible or what is going to be possible, these scenarios envision ways to teach young people in order to improve their learning and their future behavior even more. Most of these scenarios assume that they can start from the potential of every student and develop ways to realize in a 'better, faster, easier and more effective way' the relevant learning outcome. Commonly, these future plans remain faithful to the prevailing views about learning, teaching, curriculum content and the role of teachers and their instruction. The potential feasibility of these scenarios implies that they are not utopian. These scenarios reflect a future-oriented thinking about a possible reality for the school rather than a utopian thinking about an impossible reality.

Instead of formulating a future scenario, we opt for articulating a utopia. But rather than looking for a utopia in the future, we point to a utopia intrinsically linked with thinking about the school, not as a desirable yet unrealizable vision, but as a fascinating and inescapable starting point. Our thesis is that the idea of the school, and what a school stands for, always was and is based on a utopian idea. The utopian idea that school is built upon is succinctly worded as follows: 'Everyone can learn everything.' This is clearly an impossible reality,

which means that the school as the place where actually everyone is enabled to learn everything is a real utopia.



Figure 1 Everyone can learn everything

The idea is simple and radical: without exception and without distinction, anyone can learn anything. This utopian idea entails that limits or restrictions with respect to who can learn or with respect to what can be learned are non-existent. In our view, this utopian idea is widely shared in education. We assume that everyone involved in teaching and education at schools somehow always starts from the utopian idea that every student can learn everything.² In contrast to the popular scenarios for the future, this idea is a true utopia as it refers to a belief and an impossible reality. It is therefore not surprising that despite the fact that most teachers cherish the utopian idea, many fundamental and practical obstacles in the practice of teaching reveal why it is a starting point and does not refer to a possible reality. These obstacles are limited resources, limited time, differences between students, and, of course, the pressing social expectations with respect to what young people have to learn.

Beyond Naturalism and Selectivity

The utopian idea that ‘everybody can learn everything’ is a radical thought and means first and foremost that being able to learn is unconditional. Hence, the utopian idea reacts against all forms of ‘naturalism’ that link the students’ ability to learn to something like innate abilities or special talents. A naturalist vision assumes that who is able to learn and what someone is able to learn depends

on what is given by nature or by any other determining factors. The utopian idea does not deny the existence of so-called natural differences, but starts from the assumption that these differences do not determine the ability of students to learn. Learning at school is in principle unconditional. The thought that 'everyone can learn everything' also implies that what a person can learn is not pre-defined. Schools selecting students on what they are expected to be able or willing to learn is therefore inappropriate. Predetermining what someone should learn, or making selections for specific learning paths based on talent, intelligence, or performance is fundamentally at odds with the utopian idea. 'Everyone can learn everything' is based on the assumption that there is no predestination – not by birth nor by nature, and also not by selection. People are not born with a predetermined destination. The utopian idea rather implies that learning is required to shape one's own destiny. This idea is at the basis of schooling. Consequently, schooling does not start from any prior and necessary selection.

Utopia and Dystopia

In order to make the utopian idea plausible we can give a moment's thought to a way of thinking that is the exact opposite: dystopian thought. A very clear example of a dystopia is found in Plato's *Politeia* (The Republic), in which he deals with the design of the ideal state but which is also extensively concerned with education.³ According to Plato the ideal state requires different social classes to perform various tasks. Moreover, his 'fable of the metals' tells us that everybody belongs to a certain class through birth and that each class has to receive a particular kind of education. His fable thus seems to combine a form of naturalism with selectivity. It states more particularly that 'Mother Nature' mingled every human being with either gold, silver, iron, or bronze, thus implying that not everybody can learn everything. Therefore, this dystopian starting point implies that everyone's social destination is defined by nature and that education is to be conceived as the continuation of 'natural selection'. This dystopian thought is not just to be found in Greek antiquity. Indeed, we can also find it, maybe to our surprise, in the work of the famous progressive philosopher and educationalist John Dewey. In a well-known text on democracy and education, Dewey agrees with Plato that each individual should do what he or she is most apt to by nature and that education is about discovering this aptitude and subsequently training it.⁴ According to Dewey the only problem with Plato is that he connected this natural aptitude to social classes, even a very limited number of them. Plato failed to see the uniqueness of individuals, i.e., he failed to see that every individual has, by nature, a unique aptitude. Following this logic, it is not so difficult to find in current policy discourses traces

of a dystopia similar to Plato's. Such discourses often entail a call to 'mobilize' each (unique) talent for economic growth and personal well-being. The principle 'you have to develop your talent', which is today also very present in the educational context, does not assume that everybody can learn everything, but that everyone should learn what her or his talents have destined her or him to. Of course, it is not about belonging 'naturally' to some social class, as it was for Plato. It is about the development of your (unique) 'natural' talents that you have to discover or allow to be discovered in order to find your (natural) place in society. Radically stated: in an activated or mobilized society as imagined in various policy discourses, only everyone's talent counts and everyone's life is predestined. The school becomes at best a place where natural talents are discovered, selected and developed.

Pedagogical Utopianism

The fact that such dystopias are morally disputable or untenable,⁵ strengthens the appeal of the utopian idea that 'everybody can learn everything'. It also demonstrates that the pedagogical utopia is rather self-evident, and in fact just articulates the belief that the school is the place where everyone is able to find his or her destiny and to co-define his or her future (i.e., this destiny or future is not predefined by birth, descent or origin). If the utopian idea grounds the school and if this idea is broadly cherished, we don't need to search for something like the 'utopian school'. The idea 'everyone can learn everything' already grounds what and how we think about the school. Founding, building, organizing or optimizing schools already starts from the utopian idea. The utopian idea being the point of departure for schooling implies that turning this idea into a reality is actually the school's ultimate utopia.

The utopian idea reflects the famous pedagogical optimism, an optimism that many teachers, pedagogues and educational scientists are credited with, but certainly also many parents. The persistence of this optimism, often despite all kinds of (statistical, sociological, or psychological) evidence, is often derogatorily labeled as naïveté. This is justified as far as the utopian idea is confused with an unrealistic but possible scenario of the future. The so-called pedagogical optimism indeed often collides with a reality that demonstrates that not everyone can learn everything. However, utopianism cannot collide with reality, since it starts from an impossible reality. Instead of pedagogical optimism, we should therefore rather speak of a pedagogical utopianism: a pedagogical practice that always assumes that 'everyone can learn everything', but in full awareness that this assumption refers to an impossible reality.

The Role of Evaluation

The utopian idea that ‘everyone can learn everything’ has numerous implications: a positive attitude towards learning by all, an inclusive agenda, etc. One rather striking implication example relates to our thinking about evaluation. As far as evaluation is concerned the utopian idea implies that it can only be formative, can only be at the service of guiding and supporting young people (and teachers), and thus of learning itself. Any form of summative assessment, and, therefore, any assessment and evaluation resting on external requirements regarding qualification, certification, access, etc., is in contradiction with the utopian idea.⁶ The introduction of summative assessment always introduces a logic of selection as it imposes external criteria on the value or use of learning outcomes. As a consequence, it embodies the principle that not everyone can learn everything. A school without summative evaluation is probably hard to envision, but would come close to the realized utopia. This probably explains the fascination for schools in which summative evaluation plays no role whatsoever or only a very restricted one. An outstanding example of this are hospital schools, especially when these schools focus on chronically or terminally ill children. Those children actually have no future, they are fully aware of their condition, and yet – as testified by teachers in hospital schools – are eager to learn. In this setting summative assessment has no meaning whatsoever. Hospital schools come close to the realized utopia. However, as soon as these sick students are bothered with certificates, summative exams and so on, these hospital schools do come very close to a dystopian notion of school. Another striking example of the realization of a school without summative evaluation are MOOCs (or Massive Open Online Courses). The open, online courses are in principle available for everyone and are always accessible. MOOCs seem to realize the utopian idea that in principle everyone can learn everything. The number of participants willing to learn anything is fascinating. At the same time, external, often costly summative assessments to be linked to a world of MOOCs are intensively being discussed. These discussions show how hard it is to imagine a world without exams.

Scarcity, Obstacles and Returns

The utopian idea is an impossible reality that is worth pursuing. Identifying reasons why it is impossible to realize the idea may help to further specify it.

Taking the idea ‘anyone can learn anything’ as a point of departure requires huge resources, huge amounts of time and especially the absence of both structural and other obstacles. However, reality is ‘an empire of scarcity’:

limited financial resources, limited time, limited didactical and pedagogical resources. Reality also reflects 'a kingdom of obstacles': organization, appointments, coordination, etc., are required. All these are obstacles to those who take the utopian idea as a starting point. However, these obstacles are substantial and real, even structurally embedded in schools. This may explain why, despite the ample attention nowadays for school scenarios for the future, the utopian idea itself is hardly discussed. Those scenarios are 'realistic' and indeed always take as a point of departure the limited resources and the presence of obstacles. Moreover, a lot of these scenarios rather pertain to the deployment of new technologies and organizational reforms in view of making current systems more efficient or effective. They are not about the realization of a utopian idea, and they often even overlook the utopian idea.

Doing justice to the utopian point of departure that 'everyone can learn everything' requires a choice by society that is far from obvious. The massive resources and extensive regulations demonstrate the importance that society attaches to education. At the same time the provided means and the established regulations are clearly also an investment with clear purposes and with well-defined expectations towards learning. Education is indeed very often seen as a tool to monitor and safeguard specific interests of prosperity and order. However, as soon as society or governments see education as an investment, and thus provide resources in view of reaching specific and calculated yields, the utopian idea 'everyone can learn everything' is negated or at best becomes irrelevant. The tension between on the one hand investing in schools in view of predefined outcomes and on the other hand making schools starting from the assumption that 'everyone can learn' is always present, and balance is needed. The way of approaching and treating schools is often, however, completely out of balance. What is at stake in this imbalance is not simply that the presence of the utopian idea among teachers and others is not taken into account. It seems as if the policy calculations on investment always at least implicitly expect those involved in schooling to embrace the utopian idea. In spite of reducing the funds for education, society seems to remain confident that teachers will surely stick to the utopian idea that 'everyone can learn everything', and if needed will spend a lot of their own time and resources to achieve the idea. And probably society is right at this point, for those working in education often seem to work at least partly for free. Their 'utopianism' makes cutting costs easy. Since the utopian idea is a starting point, it does not allow society and government to calculate expected returns and this is why they will not be inclined to and are not even capable of investing in its actualization. At the same time they seem to trust that teachers will start from this utopian idea.

Questioning the Utopian Idea Itself

Areas of tension and multiple expectations complicate the pursuit of utopia, but more fundamentally the utopian idea itself is questioned as well. Not everyone starts from the idea that ‘everyone can learn everything’. Some start from the idea that learning is dependent on talent or ability. In educational terms, they install a dystopian idea that because of the inherent vagueness of concepts like talent or ability is as difficult to realize as the pedagogical utopia. The pedagogical utopia can also collide with political utopias, and thus with all the dreams of an impossible society. In that case, the pedagogical utopia stops being an utopia, and becomes a dystopia or a specific project for school reform. The first lever people consider in order to achieve a political utopia is upbringing and education. Attempts to achieve a political utopia will therefore often start with a reform of education and immediately negate the pedagogical utopia. Education is instrumentalized and young people are supposed to learn what contributes to an impossible society dreamed by others. Young people are destined – or even elected – to realize the political utopia, they need to learn what is defined in advance in order to realize the political ideal. What often recurs in political utopias is that what is utopian for the older generation is then turned into a realistic and predefined picture of the future for the younger generation.⁷ The pedagogical utopia is radically ignored here. Indeed, young people are approached in all respects as having a destination.

Undoubtedly, political utopias today are much less pronounced, and more or less hidden in dystopian pedagogical thoughts. In other words, past but also present dystopian ideas about the school as a place of ‘natural’ selection are the result of an unspoken attempt to realize a political utopia. Can one start from the idea that someone’s talent should determine what that person can learn, or that a future identity (cultural or otherwise) must direct what someone has to learn, without political thoughts about an ideal society? Are all references to ‘nature’ or ‘culture’ (as second nature) in talking about learning at school not always politically charged? Anyway, the utopian idea that ‘everyone can learn everything’ not being shared may offer one of the explanations for the failure (so far) of the (real) reform of secondary education. An ongoing point of discussion in the current debate is whether, when and how pupils can be selected in view of the labor market or higher education, and how common the first level(s) of secondary education should be.

The Price of the Utopian Idea

The pedagogical utopia, and the schools that are built upon it, impose a great responsibility on society.⁸ Endorsing the thought that ‘everybody can learn everything’ implies that society gives the outcomes of schooling largely out of hands, or at least does not project a particular destination onto young people. In positive terms: society is placed in a position where it can take up the responsibility to allow and enable the school as the place where everyone can learn everything. And more concretely, this is about making available a lot of resources and removing obstacles, but without exercising control. Quality control and policy that impose conditions on ‘everybody can learn everything’ or that prevent teachers from taking that idea as a point of departure imply that a society is not able or not willing to take that responsibility. In this context it needs to be investigated whether the increased emphasis by society – and particularly the labor market and higher education – on selection, orientation and qualification is an indication that it has little eye for the utopian idea.

In short: ‘Everyone can learn everything’ is a utopian idea underlying the school, and rather than presenting a possible scenario for the future, the idea is a fascinating, unreal, but inescapable starting point. Endorsing the utopian idea in education implies radically questioning the idea that the future of new generations is predefined. The explicit or implicit agreement with the point of view of predestination can and should be questioned, it is not just optional. More specifically, the question arises whether society will persistently recognize the school as the place and time where everyone can learn everything, and whether it is willing to pay the price for that choice.

Notes

- 1 See for instance ‘The Schooling for Tomorrow Scenarios’ formulated by the OECD: www.oecd.org/site/schoolingfortomorrowknowledgebase/futuresthinking/scenarios/theshoolingfortomorrowscenarios.htm. For further information: Dhert, S., Hermans, K., Smits, B., and Wouters, R., *Leren uit de toekomst* [Learning from the future], Leuven: LannooCampus, 2013.
- 2 This comes close to the ideas of Jacques Rancière on teaching under the assumption of the ‘equality of intelligences’: Rancière, J., *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- 3 Plato, *The Republic*, ed. G.F.R. Ferrari, trans. T. Griffith, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- 4 Dewey, J., *Democracy and education*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916, retrieved from https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Democracy_and_Education
- 5 The film *Divergent* (2014, directed by Neil Burger and based on the novel by Veronica North with the same title) shows what is disputable and untenable in such a society.
- 6 Whereas summative assessment pertains to assessment on which an access or selection decision is based, formative assessment pertains to assessment that gathers information in view of supporting the learning process.

- 7 For a similar warning against mixing an educational and political perspective, although from a somewhat different perspective, see Arendt, H., 'The Crisis in Education', in Arendt, H., *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York: Penguin, 1961, 170-193.
- 8 Gaston Bachelard makes a similar point when stating that "society will be made for school" and reversing the common idea that school is made for (serving) society: Bachelard, G., *La formation de l'esprit scientifique: Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective* [1934], Paris: Vrin, 1967.