

## **Sources in the Making of Histories of Education: proofs, arguments and other reasonings from the historian's workplace**

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*“Craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake” (Sennett, 2008, 9)*

We have said it often already: historical research is, certainly for what concerns the behavioral sciences, a bit awkward. Take now the history of education: can it be conceived simply as a subdivision of educational research? And does the argumentative structure that is developed in this domain of knowledge automatically give rise to the construction of “one”, let alone, “the” language of education? In our opinion, the history of education, if it wants to be valid, must, in any event, bear the stamp of what Michel de Certeau once called the “historiographical operation” (see, e.g., Delacroix et al., 2002). And this historiography, in the literal sense of the word, does not allow itself simply to be dictated to by the area to which it is applied, which, of course, does not prevent interdisciplinarity, commencing from the object studied, from being interwoven in it.

Traditionally, the historical craft is characterized by tenacious source research, as the unfortunate Marc Bloch (1886-1944) already wrote in his *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien* (1998<sup>R</sup>, first published in 1949): The study of the past, other than that of the present, necessarily rests on “indirect” perception. Telling what has been (*ton eonta legein*, as Herodotus formulated it), cannot be done without first-hand “witnesses”. For Leopold von Ranke, who started teaching about it in 1825 at the Berlin university, it thereby followed that historical factuality had to come in the first place. The historian had to set himself aside, as it were, from the facts. Parenthetically, his Berlin colleague Hegel around the same time had plunged with this history into philosophy precisely in search of the guiding principles, which presumably is part of the reason for the still present divergences between an “historical” and a “philosophical” reading of the past, also in the framework of education (see, e.g., the discussion articles of Depaepe, 2007 and Standish, 2008). But all of this did not lead Bloch to doubt about what the writing of history actually amounts to: interpretation. Facts of themselves say nothing: “understanding” was for him the key word, the guide and source of inspiration of research.

Regarding the use of sources, according to Bloch, the best can be hoped for in the future: “The most important advance that historical research has achieved in the last centuries consists probably of the increasing attention for unintentional witnesses and an almost endless accretion of new kinds of documents, which, thanks to new interdisciplinary collaboration, are now yielding their secrets.” These words, which, in the meantime, are more than 60 years old, have not lost their prophetic value. The history of the ordinary man (and woman) as well as of their functioning in everyday life was realized from the 1960s and 1970s on through the much discussed “turns” in historiography. They went in the direction of the use of oral witnesses, ego documents, and biographical material, statistics and other numerical material, visual and spatial sources, and so on. Looking back at our research careers, it occurs to us, however, that the theoretical and methodological advantage of these turns in the source material was often exaggerated because of the enthusiasm for the new and/or renewing. With these trends, one tried if not to prove then still to demonstrate that, for them, generations of historians before overlooked important perspectives in the interpretation of the past. It is this historiographical

development that we wish to describe here from the inside as a contribution to a better understanding of the language of research in the history of education.

Thus, what drives us here to the workshop of the historian of education is not, in the first place, a concern to secure our own place in the gallery of the history of the discipline but the fact that one can speak knowledgeably about the use of sources only on the basis of one's own research experience. And this research experience indicated, up to now in any case, that there is no one single privileged source but that a well nuanced and contextualized history of education rests in any event on a combination of all sorts of source material. Therefore, in what follows, we will also discuss not one single source (for example, autobiographies, copybooks, objects of material school culture, visual material, etc.; see in this respect, e.g., Lawn & Grosvenor, 2005; Mietzner, Myers & Peim, 2005). Our approach is different. It includes, as we said, a reflection on the more than three decades of our collaboration, which is perhaps quite unique in the field of the history of education, but for what concerns the Flemish as well as the international context, has turned out to be not at all unfruitful. Rather than wanting to compete with each other as "rivals" within the same field, we, as representatives of the two most important universities in Flanders, worked together from the outset. Thus, we hoped to be able to give the Belgian production in the field of the history of education more weight abroad.

Still that kind of strategic consideration certainly did not occupy the primary place for us – and this is much more than a later rhetorical projection. Historically seen, our collaboration rested on the intrinsic pleasures of the craft for which we had acquired a permanent taste in the context of an interuniversity research project (under the leadership of Maurits De Vroede [1922-2001]) from the late 1970s on. It is in this sense that the motto at the head of this article must be read. With Richard Sennett (2008), we can do nothing other than testify, on the basis of our own experience, that craftsmanship is at the foundation of the motive to execute a job well for its own sake. It is an enduring, intrinsic motivation, therefore, that we acquired first of all by the reading of the journals of education that appeared in Belgium – a source, that was called by professor De Vroede the "pedagogical periodicals" and became for us "the mother of all sources".

### **Pedagogical periodicals: the mother of all sources**

De Vroede commenced the opening up of the pedagogical periodicals, which he by means of the title of the six impressive, hefty repertoria that resulted from them, correctly labeled the beating heart of "the pedagogical life in Belgium" (see De Vroede et al., 1973-1987), during the academic year of 1969/1970. For this, he engaged both in Leuven (his own workshop) as in Ghent an entire team of researchers, each of whom were charged individually with the reading of and reporting on a number of journals on formation and education that had appeared in Belgium since 1815. By delving into these sources, his "collaborators" learned the Belgian history of education of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries from the inside out in many of its facets. Indeed, pedagogical periodicals constituted not only a mirror of the times, but they were also in most cases, as educational journals of educators (schoolmen rather than schoolwomen) and for educators (schoolwomen rather than schoolmen at least for what concerns primary education in the twentieth century) true guides for the theory as well as the practice of education. Thus, we feel we may indeed describe this "pedagogical press" here as the "mother" of all sources for the history of education. The essential, of course, concerns the richness of this specific source. Little or nothing of what came to the surface in the pedagogical life in Belgium escaped the attention of the journal editors and their colleagues of the time. They problematized in their many articles the sore points and sensitivities that

occurred in the everyday reality and mentality of education providers, which enables these “periodicals” to be deemed, indeed, a true goldmine for educational historiography.

Indisputably, many of the texts published in the pedagogical press had a normative character; they were, ultimately, conceived from the supply side of formation and education and thus often expressed the intention of an educational objective or philosophy. Nevertheless, as we have indicated elsewhere (Depaepe et al., 2000; Dams, Depaepe & Simon, 2002), via an intelligent, generally indirect reading of the arguments (and expositions) used, it is possible, indeed, to capture the “normality” through this “normativity” of the source. How normative the message there proclaimed may have been “normality” inevitably always crept in through the framing and the contextualization. A teacher who, by means of an article in an educational journal wanted to praise one or another magic charm for maintaining discipline in the class, could not avoid also saying many things about this very class in passing: how it was organized, what it looked like, and so on. Undoubtedly, this teacher could have highly exaggerated the importance and the effects of the praised method and extolled its educational objective or whatever, but the contours of the historical class and school reality did not escape him as author. This “context” is unavoidably present as the background of his “text” and allows itself to be readily investigated by all sorts of discursive techniques (close reading, etc.) of the propagated message.

From this perspective, the “serial” character of the pedagogical journals, which, in some cases, continued to appear for even more than a century, is also an important advantage. Because these journals often had a very specific “mission” – some were explicitly founded to propagate a specific philosophy, ideology, and/or the related vision of education – one can also derive how that message developed on the level of the “rhetoric” (if you will, the discourse of the “text”) and how this was translated concretely into the everyday “reality” (of the practical-organizational “con”-text) and to what tensions, shifts, paradoxes, ironies, etc., all this gave rise to. In this sense, the journals provide a relatively homogenous space – the articles came about under the editorship of like-minded people – a solid basis for “diachronic” research (if one wants to do “developmental research” over the years), which, moreover can be done in large measure in a “depersonalized” manner. Indeed, the filter of the edition applied in most cases as an ideological buffer for what could/might be published and what not. This is why each journal generally recruited from the same circle of authors and also why a conscious or unconscious censorship was applied. Journals are not only a serial source but also a “closed” source that permit all sorts of quantitative (and/or quantifiable) operations to be conducted: from the simplest calculation of percentages (for example, the portion of the articles written by men or women, by teachers, by inspectors, by university graduates; or the share of the articles about a specific subject within one or another content category and so on) up to and with the making of more complicated models and the presentations (for example, sociograms and cartographies of authors, editorial staffs, etc. covering various journals).

We did not go so far in the cataloging of the Belgian pedagogical press. As paper time documents of the 1970s, this repertorium did not have as yet the advantages (search functions, for example) that modern electronic processing would have made possible. The characterization given in the repertorium for each journal is thus, in large measure, dependant on the manner in which the individual author, one of the collaborators of the research collectivity developed it. It is true that, on the level of the main editor, all kinds of guiding, if possible “corrective” interventions took place, but this did not remove the randomness of what was included and what not included in the description. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same applies for the subject register included as index (in addition to the index of names: persons, authors, and places together). In contrast with this – and this was certainly an innovation for what concerns pedagogical periodicals – systematic research was done on the precise period in which the journal appeared, how the cover, the title, and the subtitle evolved, how the

editorial board was composed, who led it and who served as secretary, which organization or group supported it, who functioned as printer and publisher, what colleagues wrote specific articles for the journal (including the book reviews), and so on. All of this exercised not only the heuristic skills of the researchers (for example, to identify authors who signed only with their initials, for example) but also their interpretative skills. Moreover, they had to make excerpts of the entire journal from A to Z (and also read it closely) in order to be able to characterize them, whereby they were truly immersed in the *Zeitgeist* of the concepts and practices of the time. In short, it is not surprising that the publication of these imposing “yellow books” (so named by the users later on because of the color of the covers in which they were published) inspired similar projects in other countries (France, Portugal, etc.).

In Belgium itself, the opening up of sources for the history of education was further explored by a core of the same research group (see Van Rompaey, 2003). This took place during the 1990s in close collaboration with the Christian Educational Union (COV: *Christelijke Onderwijsvakbond*) – which, moreover, is just as much a unique story. The COV was founded in 1893. In 1983, a project group was established within the union that would occupy itself in a professional and independent manner with the history of primary and pre-school education in general and that of the teacher in particular. All of this was done in view of the celebration of the approaching centennial of the union in 1993.

### **Bibliographies of works and sources: focusing (still too much) on a definitive synthesis**

As long as Professor De Vroede led this group, there could not be the least doubt about the direction in which one must continue to work: all relevant sources had to be made available by means of tools for otherwise no systematic research was possible. Indeed, the object was to write a virtually “definitive” synthesis that would live on as “[the] history of primary education” and would constitute a milestone in general historiography. Such a conception undoubtedly rested on the inspiration that De Vroede had received in his own training as an historian. Moreover, this was further nourished by the attention that had been given in the 1960s in Belgium to the compilation of a repertorium of the “ordinary” press (Van Eenoo & Vermeersch, 1962). The same historiographical tradition also accounts for the almost compulsive craving for completeness that characterized just as much the publication of the “yellow book” discussed above. Any page that had ever appeared about education had to be in it. The sources that were available to the historian for his research had to be studied in their entirety, for, according to the prevailing conception, on it must rest not only the description of the developments studied but also their explanation.

Rounding off the projects, which had been started already in 1983, there appeared from this point of view in 1988 with the support of the COV a bilingual bibliography of works about the history of the Belgian pre-school, primary, and teacher-training education. (De Vroede, Lory & Simon, 1988). This publication was complemented in 1991 by a bibliography of primary sources (written) (Depaepe, De Vroede, Lory & Simon, 1991). It included pedagogically-oriented monographs, brochures, governmental publications, compendia of legislation on education, curricula and so on. The “tools” that were launched into the world from our group certainly did not stand alone on the international scene. Such meticulous work marked the construction of the infrastructure of research in the history of education by means of national and international associations virtually everywhere in Europe and the United States in the pre-electronic era. The making available of sources seemed certainly to be the core task of the researchers in that area. They formed the solid ground under the feet of the historians who, seldom without any ambition for the survival of their work, wanted thereby to give back to the community what it had invested in it.

## **Educational statistics: a policy-colored source for research into long-term processes that can hardly stand alone**

More or less in the same spirit and joining up with the “cliometric” trends that were emerging in other countries, we were interested in working with educational statistics already at the end of the 1970s. During the first half of the 1990s, all this resulted in the making available of the Belgian educational statistics for primary education, again in collaboration with the COV and thanks to the presence of a skilled research assistant (who figured as the main author: see Minten et al., 1991-1996) – a condition upon which the success or failure of such extensive and labor-intensive projects generally depends – but we will leave this at that. These years of effort, moreover, harvested international appreciation, and they resulted later also in a similar plan for secondary education. But that was not the greatest benefit of the project. Unquestionably, this lay in the properly grounded source criticism that accompanied the publication of the figures and on which our own long-term research on the basis of the same data could only benefit in relation to, among other things, the feminization process (see, e.g., Depaepe, Lauwers, Simon, Hellinckx & Van Rompaey, 2007).

In our project, the opening up of educational statistics consisted of the making available of “homogenous” (i.e., comparable within the categories applied historically) data series concerning the number of schools, the number of teachers, and the number of pupils on the basis of the national counts that were officially prescribed for primary education in Belgium by law since 1842. In practice, we compiled data in our publication by means of a vertical, lengthwise, serial, or diachronic manner of presentation (by means of tables and graphs) that were published previously by category of schools (according to the legal description in force on the basis of the specific governing authority) and by geographical unit (for example, by province but also chronologically split between “urban” and “rural”) “horizontally” (that is, related to each calendar year) primarily in the triennial reports on primary education that were to be submitted by law to the parliament under the responsibility of the minister for education. However, it is obvious that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century “objectification” of educational policy striven for by means of the publication of official figures did not escape the educational political agenda of the time. On the contrary, the generation of the numerical material, if you will, the “fabrication of the statistics” (see Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2001), constituted precisely an element of the policy strategy to promote the political objectives of the time. Therefore, we contextualized and read this policy-colored governmental source as such. According to the telling testimony of the former school inspector Leo Roels – moreover not just anyone in the Belgian educational landscape as he participated in the foundation of the Decrolyan-inspired curriculum of 1936 – the compilation of the elementary statistical data from the sources was not always a sinecure. The required “cooperation” of the staff (teachers, administrators, as well as inspectors) was based not always and probably also not primarily on the concern for correct and accurate information. In addition to routine, incomprehension, fantasy, and the like, self-interest among the school personnel was naturally also operative: for example, the desire to preserve one’s own class or school, if possible expressed in terms of the “greater” importance of the “network” (or the pillar) to which the institution belonged – certainly when there was not yet compulsory education (introduced in Belgium only in 1914) or was not yet stringently enforced.

As also has emerged from other research (see Depaepe et al., 2000), the political-ideological struggle around primary education in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Belgium was at the foundation of the “pillarization” of the society. At the same time, it brought to the surface a difference in the view of education between the Catholic and the non-Catholic camps: in the first case, moral formation outweighed the acquisition of knowledge; in the second, this relationship was inverted. Moreover, the Catholics strove for decentralization of the power as regards

education while the non-Catholics (and particularly the progressive-radical wing of the liberal party) propagated the centralization of the nation-state as the policy model. It was thus far from chance that, in the official reporting, when the non-Catholics came to power in 1879, figures not longer appeared about the “free” (i.e. denominational, i.c. Catholic) schools. Because of the new measures, they fell outside the control and subsidization apparatus of the state, and one apparently acted as though they no longer existed. The Catholics, on the contrary, who prepared for a genuine “school war” that saturated the society on the basis of the rhetoric around “the innocent soul of the child”, launched a data battle with the authorities in order to demonstrate by means of all sorts of individual publications how great their power of education really was. Thus, regarding the use of statistical data, the school war can also be seen as a struggle of the government for a homogenizing national memory above a differentiated local memory.

However that may be, our feminization research has, as noted, demonstrated that the publication of such homogenous data series can be a goldmine for historical research over the long term. On the basis of such “empirical” data, for example, stereotypical and generally non-historical conceptions, as though the “problem” of feminization was one of recent date, can be punctured. As regards Belgium, there were constantly more female than male teachers active in primary education from 1898 on (following an almost linearly increasing curve). Only in the 1920s was this growth slightly moderated, which presumably was due to all sorts of social factors: the looming economic recession but also the ban on marriages that was imposed on the functioning of female teachers in the Catholic schools. Self-evidently, quantitative data about the number and share of female teachers say nothing about the historical context in which this evolution took place. Thus, for example, they reveal nothing about the relations of laity to religious on the work floor, the extent to which the profession constituted an opportunity to climb up the social ladder via teaching, and even to play, from a feminist point of view, an emancipatory pioneering role. Such insights, also and primarily in relation to the pedagogical “paradox” of feminism as opposed to feminization – the advancing emancipation of the woman apparently could not hold back the sex-specific division of professions – can only be generated through the combination of all sorts of sources.

Therefore, with a view of the positioning of the social significance of the teachers (female but also male) – the more “modest” synthesis that we ourselves aimed for within the working group on the occasion of the centennial of the union (Depaepe, De Vroede & Simon, 1993) – we conducted an historical survey with a statistically relevant sample of the parties in the beginning of the 1990s. This yielded basic material for five generations on the family origins, social backgrounds, educational levels, social integration, and cultural production of teachers. And as far as the female teachers as such is concerned, one of our research collaborators later interviewed a number of privileged witnesses both over their role in the union and over the experience of the marriage ban that continued to exist in Catholic primary education in Flanders until 1963 (see Van Rompaey, Depaepe & Simon, 2009). The union, itself being confronted with a strong increase in the number of women among their members, had perceived the relevance of this “historical” process. However, this did not mean that our history of education research suddenly became policy oriented. Quite the contrary: this it never was and will never become, mainly for theoretical, methodological, and ideological reasons.

With this oral historiography, we were certainly not just starting out. For the construction of our historical synthesis around the social position of the teacher, which we had operationalized in several sub-questions, we could, for example, make use of around a hundred interviews of oral witnesses that had been conducted earlier in the framework of the research into the development of professional organizations of teachers. And, recently, we have taken the technique of oral history again off the shelf in the framework of the study of

the “progressive pedagogical heritage” in Flanders (De Coster, Depaepe & Simon, 2009) as well as in relation to our investigation of the structuring elements within the experience of the school past (Depaepe, Simon, Surmont & Van Gorp, 2007). We shall return to both of these matters later, but let us be clear here: oral-witness statements, just as much as the statistics, are unable to give answers to all of our research questions. Although they often cover certain grey areas that hardly come to the fore in the written sources (the nature of the interpersonal relationship between the various educational actors, for example), still they must, because of their *a posteriori* character and the accompanying discoloring (they are, after all, “constructions” later on of a past that has “evaporated” for good), have to be approached with the necessary historical critique. And from where can this critique come than from confrontation with other source material? In many cases, oral-witness statements – as in our study of the progressive pedagogical heritage – are, moreover, autobiographical material (and thus closely related to ego documents) and must be contextualized as such from the life histories of the people involved (in our case, the still “special” group of leftist intellectuals of the 1960s). In short, it is the mix of multifaceted source material that offers the best guarantees for adequate answers.

Let us not go too far ahead of our general conclusions and turn back for a little while to the educational statistics. Here we can, in any case, conclude that the “historical-critical” production of homogenous data series would be far from superfluous. But that work is, of course, not as simple as it might seem, as we ourselves could experience personally when we had finished that complementary project for secondary education (D’hoker et al., 2006). That produced, in comparison with the first, certainly not the same comprehensive results. The situation of secondary education, as regards Belgium, because of the historically determined “freedom of education” as well as because of the elitist importance that was attached to it, is so complicated that a meaningful compilation of data over its development is, if not impossible, then certainly very difficult. Because of the rather meager resources and the often large turnover of personnel in the project, we were compelled to focus on what was truly comparable (that is, that for which there were truly serial data: the period after the Second World War, which we closed with the year 2000, the *terminus ad quem*). Its pre-history has thus remained undeveloped terrain for the time being. It may be one of the ironies and paradoxes of the globalizing, neo-conservative society that there is little money to be found for such long-term and labor-intensive projects (an understatement that, moreover, applies for the entire sector of educational historiography, but this again we leave to one side). Apparently, such well-considered culture-historical projects over the long term have little attraction for the short-sighted policymakers of the present – apart from the fact that their critical content can also be disturbing, they appear most irrelevant and useless for contemporary politics – but still we have to note that the same neo-conservative policy makers have, in the meantime, made statistics an essential policy instrument, also as regards education. There comes to mind the influence of the many European performance indicators, quality controls, and evaluations in the framework of Pisa and Timms, the statistical analyses of the *Centre for Educational Research and Innovation* of the OECD, etc. and the many normative implications that such standardizing bring with them (but that is material for another article).

**The textbook: assert the appreciation but also the historicity as well as the contextualization of a source**

During the second half of the 1990s, we invested a great deal of time and energy in the opening up of the school “textbook” – self-evidently a first-class source for historical research in education that, as such, had already been the object of analogous projects in other

countries, near and far. France, Spain (followed by Latin America), and Germany were in the lead, while Canada, where there are actually many analogies with the Belgian situation, can be listed just as much as examples for us (see Depaepe, D’hoker & Simon, 2003).

In spite of various starts and preliminary studies, our predecessors did not succeed in adequately mapping the historical production of the Belgian textbook. This was due to several factors. First, there was here, as elsewhere, little interest on the part of the academic historians in such a schoolish source. Second, as regards the Belgian situation, the production of textbooks as immense, which again was related to the decentralization policy of the Catholic Church as well as of the local authorities so that there were publishers in virtually every city or large town who published textbooks. An estimate on the basis of a provisional inventory databank yielded easily at least 30,000 textbooks used in Belgium for primary and secondary education in the period before the First World War. For these reasons, the publication of a “repertorium” appeared to us to be a very difficult job, a true *via dolorosa*. The notion of a calvary was also prompted by, on the one hand, the many difficulties that we had encountered in being able to obtain on-going financial support for our projects and, on the other, in attracting personnel prepared to continue to work in the uncertain status of a very temporary and not very well paid job. As regards the content, too, we saw the publication of a detailed repertorium as not being realistic. In contrast to what is widespread internationally, we finally opted for a more realistic, a more practical, and, in any case, a less comprehensive approach. Instead of setting out to describe all of the textbooks published in Belgium (and basing ourselves on the bibliographical lists of the known publications), we took only those textbooks that we ourselves had manually processed in four major collections in Flanders and Brussels (for the period 1830-1880). But that, too, did not go smoothly because our colleagues often, whether or not via the detour of old fashioned note card files, had to penetrate to the material reality of the textbook.

Moreover, our way of working deviated in another way from what was being propagated internationally. Probably through the living contact with the many textbooks – we ultimately described almost 4000 titles in our repertorium – we published few indexes to the published textbook file. Only a list of authors, in our opinion, had to suffice for the user. Subject indexes, indeed, have the disadvantage of working, in our opinion, with supra-historical (and thereby a-historical) categories. That is the case not only with the indications of the so-called courses under which the textbooks come but also with the introduction of educational levels for which the individual textbooks were intended. To begin with the latter: generally for such a classification one starts from the present situation (for example, pre-school, primary, secondary, technical, vocational, higher and university education), but this categorization is inevitably “presentist” of nature. It is imposed from the present onto the past and thereby distorts the historical process of the formation of these educational levels. The same applies for the often-professed categorizations between scientific disciplines and their respective didactic translations for education. If one proclaims them to be supra-historical categories from a contemporary standpoint, one sees neither the paradigmatic developments, modes and turns that have occurred over time within these general supra-categories nor the differentiations that have been manifested horizontally within the monolithically conceived disciplinary matrix. To make all this concrete, can one simply place “bible history”, “liturgy”, “Eucharistic crusade”, “dogma”, “theology”, “catechism”, etc. under one and the same name “religion”? In our opinion, what the textbook authors actually had in mind with their writing is best determined from the title and the subtitle, certainly for what concerns the nineteenth-century production. When these titles can be made available electronically (for example, by means of registration on a CD-ROM disk), waltzing through them with a search function is no problem. Even though, of course, in addition to some flexibility, sufficient familiarity with them is required on the part of the user, and then we are talking not so much about the

technology as about the content. Whoever wants to use textbooks for historical research in education has to have sufficient preliminary knowledge. Indeed, he must be able to develop adequate questions to pose to the sources. This will be imposed upon him not primarily by the material. Perhaps, it could be by certain subject indexes, but these unavoidably betray again the research agenda of the compilers. That, too, was a reason why we ultimately dropped it.

Whether all of this will result in better history of education research on the international forum remains, in the meantime, very much the question. As we have repeatedly argued in the framework of the *Internationale Gesellschaft für historische und systematische Schulbuchforschung* in Ichenhausen, Germany, and of the Ibero-American group *PatreManes*, such research involves vastly much more than the stating of what stands in the textbooks themselves (Depaepe & Van Gorp, 2009). Here, too, one can in no way permit oneself to be held prisoner by one single source, however rich and however important it may be of itself. Whoever wishes to obtain the pedagogical and didactic practices in the class via the textbook cannot do without the existing literature and the classic sources that have been amply discussed above. This certainly applies for one who wishes to place the educational practice in its broader social context. Here, we can refer to our attempts to interpret the textbook in the colonial contexts of the Belgian Congo as an example (and the school songs that sometimes served when actual textbooks were lacking: Depaepe, Briffaerts, Kita & Vinck, 2003; Kita & Depaepe, 2004). Here, statistics, governmental publications, having been printed with and without declarations of pedagogical intent, inspectors' reports, and chronicles dug up from archives of teaching congregations, played a prominent role, as did ego documents – letters from missionaries, for example – as well as oral witnesses of those who had to undergo colonial education (see, e.g. Vinck, Briffaerts, Herman & Depaepe, 2006).

All of this will not immediately strike the historical researcher as surprising. Education, as a social event, occurred not only on the level of the class, but was, as shown here with regard to the statistics, very clearly imbedded in a political-ideological framework of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. More striking, perhaps, is the observation that this conclusion also continues to apply for the one who wishes to study educational practice (the schoolish actions of themselves) both as a relative and as an autonomous phenomenon. From a content analysis of the textbooks themselves (in pre-structured categories or not), one need not expect a faithful reconstruction of the pedagogical past in the class, let alone an impetus for any theory formation around it. Nor, in this regard, can one do much with the knowledge that mother in virtually all reading lessons in the world did the dishes while father sat reading his newspaper (Depaepe & Van Gorp, 2009).

Within the framework of the cooperation with the union we have finally taken the pedagogical “micro-level” of the class as object of our research. As a supplement to our study of the social position of the teacher (Depaepe, De Vroede & Simon, 1993), we particularly wanted to know what his everyday activities on the work floor looked like in the concrete. Our presumption, which was later confirmed, was that a very great measure of continuity would be discerned, which, moreover, was what other authors had already demonstrated in the United States as well as in Europe (Depaepe et al. 2000). The study that emerged at the end of the 1990s rested on many kinds of source material that we had prepared with the various working instruments. Nevertheless, the periodicals again prevailed – and that was unique – as the “mother of all sources” in the history of education. By means of the technique of “close reading” mentioned above, we compared a number of journals we selected (on the basis of the Catholic vs. non-Catholic, conservative vs. modern, and Dutch-language vs. French-language axes) with respect to three key periods (the 1880s, the 1930s, and the 1960s). And what turned out? Within all these various contexts, there was a very strong line of continuity regarding formation and educational behavior. With the combination of the “pedagogical” and the “didactic”, we considered that we had contributed something of value

with respect to the existing studies over what is called the “grammar of schooling”, which, admittedly, had pointed to the tough historical structures of education but failed to appreciate sufficiently, in our opinion, the pedagogical semantic within which this didactic grammar was immersed.

This pronounced preference for the pedagogical periodicals as opposed to the latest “turns”, such as the rush to the visual (see Catteeuw, Dams, Depaepe & Simon, 2005), was not appreciated everywhere. In this regard, we were even accused of “iconophobia” (Del Pozo Andrés, 2006). Had we failed to appreciate a number of “modes” or “trends” or even missed genuine paradigms?

### **Material sources of education: more than artifacts from the educational memory**

In the beginning of the 2000s, the “materialities of schooling” came more and more to the attention of researchers (see Lawn & Grosvenor, 2005). Ultimately it concerns here a mishmash of “artifacts”, remnants of a pedagogical (generally “schoolish”) past that often have symbolic significance: school desks, slates, slate-pencils, pens, inkpots, blackboards, blackboard erasers, wall posters, and other wall decorations: photographs of the king and the queen, flags, crucifixes, measures of content, but just as well children’s drawings and assignments, copybooks and schoolbags, dustcoats, gym shoes, gymnastic equipment and gear, the school bell, and so on. Since the 1970’s and 1980, many of these things have been collected, preserved, and exhibited in school museums, which sprung out of the ground like mushrooms in the last decade of the last century.

That collecting is, obviously, important, as is the development of museum expertise in its regard, but this may not end up in a nostalgic naval-gazing, a narcissistic longing for the “the good old days” (when the “back then” generally coincides with the period of one’s own childhood). Having to generate income from visits of older people who can enjoy themselves by playing “the school of yesteryear” as is now occurring here and there in Germany, we find, at the very least, dubious. In our opinion, the operation of the museums as regards their content must, in any event, be based on scholarly research. For the making available of material sources, we ourselves have contributed by means of the study of wall charts and exercise books (e.g. Herman, Surmont, Depaepe, Simon & Van Gorp, 2008).

But historical research is more than a search for the “ultimate” source. A new look at the educational historiography can never come from the sources themselves: one who remains imprisoned in his sources necessarily produces very descriptive works with explanations “from the sources”. And is that what contemporary pedagogical historiography needs? Already in 1996, Tenorth (1996) praised the “handwork” in educational historiography, in other words the patient dealing with the sources, but simultaneously pilloried the lack of theory content in the discipline. We can concur with this. It is not the source that stands at the beginning of the historiographical operation (following a concept of Certeau) but rather the research question, and it is this question that is determinative for the use of sources (for our part, a plurality of them). Moreover, the answer to this research question is not only and probably also not primarily dependent on the source used but on the (hermeneutical) interpretation that is formulated on the basis of these sources from the past. And this occurs on the basis of an entire arsenal of tools: concepts, theories, paradigms, and the like. Perhaps, it is then better, instead of conducting discussions over the best source, to concentrate on the theoretical side of educational historiography. For, as Tenorth also stated, theory development within the history of education is generally impoverished. At most, one finds a number of “imported” theories (such as the Foucauldian normalization), but little work is done on insights from within. And that is precisely what we wanted to contribute to with our study of

the everyday actions – as well as with our interpretation of the concept of “pedagogization” (Depaepe, Herman, Surmont, Van Gorp & Simon, 2009).

### **By way of conclusion: beyond iconophobia ...**

There is no ultimate source just as there is no ultimate interpretation, argumentation, proof, and/or explanation. And there never has been one. In psychology psychoanalytical and behaviorist and other explanations were very much in fashion, but now they have given way to the neurological explanatory patterns, which, of course, are just as reductionist. Neurobiology and cognitive psychology now provide the repertoire of concepts. “Commonsense” explanations and stories, as in the historical craft, are felt to be deficient and are often relegated to “folk psychology” (which, ironically enough, was developed by Wundt, himself the founding father of experimental psychology).

The “*posicionamiento iconofóbico*” ascribed to us (Del Pozo Andrés, 2006, 295) thus has little to rest on and is perhaps caused by an over-enthusiasm of our “accusers” to work with the so-called new sources (the kick of the “discovery”). Let us not forget that photography has a long tradition of theory formation and analysis, moreover with a variety of methodological approaches, which, admittedly, require coordination. We have also never stated that one cannot or must not use iconographic sources, just that the faith in the omnipotence of this one source sometimes leads to one-sided, context-less interpretations. Much more still than with the written source, attention is necessary for a discursive analysis with the visual source, which certainly applies for photographs. In the photographic “language”, the one-time, the concrete, the accidental but also the *mise-en-scène* is radicalized and rendered absolute by the medium. But these photographs and films can hardly be interpreted without the supporting message. With regard to our research into the history of the class, we found caricatural images from novels as well as documentary, publicity, and thus advertising messages that were “taken from life”. But it is self-evident that the last were “at their Sunday best” (in the sense that they wanted to present the reality as cleansed as possible). That does not prevent that medium from being taken seriously, and not merely the message must be problematized for historical research. By using a variety of sources, one is better able to distance oneself from the story of the original actor in order better to interrogate the story “under way” and to change the actual story, the actual explanation more substantially. The irony of history, moreover, has it that we, with the organization of ISCHE XX in 1998 (Depaepe & Henkens, 2000), precisely wanted to give an impulse to the valorization of visual sources within international educational historiography. Indeed, we have been using these sources in our research up to the present (see, e.g. Devlieger, Grosvenor, Simon, Van Hove & Vanobbergen, 2008).

Like anyone, we do not like to be wrongly accused of something. In order to satisfy our accusers, we will here use their own weapons to dispose of a stubborn position: within the canonized historiography of the open-air school, the idea prevails that the observable renewals in school construction have profoundly changed educational practice. To a progressive architecture belongs a progressive pedagogy. A witness of this is the book that resulted from an international interdisciplinary colloquium on the history of the open-air schools in Paris (Châtelet, Lerch & Luc, 2003). Our critical message there (Depaepe & Simon, 2003), unfortunately, could not keep research questions and themes, inspired by a few unquestioned assumptions from the self-discourse of the movement, from being central. For example, that the open-air schools would have been “*laboratoires d’expériences pédagogiques*” from which renewal X in/of education automatically flowed, or that the architecture of these schools was associated with favorable consequences on the pedagogical-didactic level. The “originality” and “extensiveness” of the concept of the open-air school – for it had, indeed, long been

present in many countries – as is “eloquently” illustrated by the sources of the time, were hardly challenged in most of the contributions in the book. What still reigns is an almost naïve faith in the open-air school as an instrument of progress. However, one who looks at contextualized reality from out of educational historiography does, indeed, see that the “images speak for themselves”: totally classic education with more air. Iconophobe or iconophile, it actually makes no difference as long as the results of the research are valid.

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## **Abstract “Sources in the making of histories of education” for the introduction**

Depaepe & Simon lead us with their contribution to the workplace of the historian of education. By reflecting on their own production of “histories” of education, they show how sources function as arguments and even as proofs within the “historiographical operation” – a concept which we owe to Michel de Certeau. Traditionally, the historical craft is characterized by tenacious research of “sources”, but dealing with such primary records cannot be done successfully without interpretation. As the unfortunate Marc Bloch already had stated before the second world war, “understanding” is the key-word for any historical craftsman. From this perspective, the massively discussed historiographic “turns” since the 1960s and 1970s have to be qualified. It seems to Depaepe & Simon that the methodological advantage of the use of oral history, ego documents, statistics, pictures, films, material objects of school culture, and other “forgotten” sources from everyday life in education was often exaggerated because of the enthusiasm for the “newness” of their approach. On the basis of their own research experience they develop the thesis that there is no single privileged source for research in the history of education. Well nuanced and contextualized “histories” of education have to rest on a combination of all sorts of source material. Historical research is more than a search for the ultimate source: a historian who remains imprisoned in the sources necessarily produces descriptive works with explanations “from” the sources. But it is not the source that stands at the beginning of the historiographical operation, but rather the research question, and it is this question that is determinative for the use of sources, including traditional ones (like the old journals of education, made by teachers and educators for teachers and educators – the so-called pedagogical press which is labeled by the authors as the “mother” of all sources in history of education). And the answer to this research question is not only and not primarily dependent on the sources used but again on the interpretation that is formulated on the basis of these artifacts from the past. So, the workplace of the historian is not only filled with sources, but an entire arsenal of tools: concepts, theories, paradigms, and the like. There is no ultimate source just as there is no ultimate interpretation, argumentation, proof and/or explanation. From this perspective, the critique that has been formulated against both authors, who have been for their part wrongly accused of being “iconophobe”, does not say very much. Iconophobe or iconophile, it actually makes no difference, as long as the results of the histories of education are valid.

### **Key words for the index:**

history [of education], histories, historiography, methodology, sources, education journals, pedagogical periodical, pedagogical press, bibliographies, statistics, textbooks, material sources, educational memory, visual material, iconophobia, Belgium, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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Since the beginning of the 1970s Frank Simon, professor in history of education at Ghent University is doing socio-historical research on education, more specifically on pre-school and primary education. Most of his research is in collaboration with the research group on the history of education of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (M. Depaepe, A. Van Gorp) and deals with education policy, teacher unions, the teaching profession, and Progressive Education (Ovide Decroly); the last decade the research is focussed on everyday educational practice, classroom and curriculum history. Since August 2006 he serves as chairperson of the “International Standing Conference for the History of Education” (ISCHE) .