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## Curriculum in Abundance – A Phenomenological Reading

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*The writing-reading relation is thus not a particular case of the speaking-answering relation. It is not a relation of interlocution, not an instance of dialogue. It does not suffice to say that reading is a dialogue with the author through his work, for the relation of the reader to the book is of a completely different nature. Dialogue is an exchange of questions and answers; there is no exchange of this sort between the writer and the reader. The writer does not respond to the reader. Rather, the book divides the act of writing and the act of reading into two sides, between which there is no communication. (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 146)*

*Insofar as the meaning of a text is rendered autonomous with respect to the subjective intention of its author, the essential question is not to recover, behind the text, the lost intention, but to unfold, front of the text, the “world” which it opens up and discloses. (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 111)*

### Introduction

I start this essay with a statement: *Curriculum in Abundance* is not an “easy read”. Not even for an experienced and keen reader of educational and philosophical literature. I have wrestled with the text for several reasons. First, anthologies always pose a challenge to the reader. A number of independent texts demand to be read for their own unique value while at the same time the format of an anthology claims the interdependency of the texts. Second, I have read – not by explicit choice but by nature and culture – *Curriculum in Abundance* with several voices whispering on my shoulder: one belonging to the senior high school teacher, another belonging to the teacher educator and researcher, and a third belonging to the mother of two children. These three voices constantly interfered with, engaged in, and discussed the text while I was reading it. And they were doing battle because of their different areas of interest and the different worlds they inhabit. The high school teacher being criticized by the academic for being narrow-minded, unwilling to change; the mother scolding the teacher for reducing her children to mere students and worrying about her children’s future; the high school teacher devastated by the academic’s ignorance to understand the contingency of everyday pedagogical practice. The greater animosity, I believe, was between the senior high teacher and the researcher. Having lived in the midst

of this battle ground since I first opened *Curriculum in Abundance*, Ricoeur's notions of opening up and disclosing of the world relieved me of the burden of having to choose one of these voices for this essay. In and through my "what-ness", I do exist in this world, beyond my "wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxviii) in my "who-ness". In other words: I would like to believe that I have read *Curriculum in Abundance* as a fellow human being, who cares and worries about our children's well-being in their present as well as in their future life.

As already stated, *Curriculum in Abundance* is a challenging text to read. Not that the language is complicated – quite the contrary – but because of the underlying message, a message that some teachers probably will find provocative. Sometimes exhausted, I paused and asked myself "What do I, as a teacher and teacher educator, *do* with all this?" I was well into the book when I realized that *I* did not have to do anything, since the text had already done something with *me*. Because it must have. Why else all the underlining, all question marks, all exclamation marks? Why the comments in all spaces surrounding the printed text? Probably, what I experienced was philosophy as letting-happen (Heidegger, 2000), a peaceful dwelling in the text.

It would be a great mistake, and highly unfair, to treat *Curriculum in Abundance* as a piece on educational method, something that could be put to *use* – in a pragmatic sense. "Abundance is a practice" (p. 10), Jardine holds and I cannot but agree. The call from teachers and teacher students for efficient Methods, which could be taught and learned, shows clearly, when Jardine et al recount meetings with teacher students, who admit that the idea of "curriculum in abundance" is attractive. Yet they agree: "Maybe I'll stick with the more standard stuff when I begin teaching until I get more experience" (p. 100), or that they will try it "later on", after they've got a few years under their belts" (p. 232). *Curriculum in Abundance* is not a handbook on how to *act* in the classroom. It is a voyage into modes of *being*, ways of wistfully dwelling with the children, who parents have entrusted in our pedagogical care and as such instigation for a more reflective perspective on the how, what, and why dimensions of teaching. Concurrently, in its philosophical, moral/ethical orientation the book implies a political message. In spite of any criticism or reservations I may have, I find it impossible not to be touched and engaged by the message of the book and I am grateful for being given the opportunity to share my unfolding of the text and "the 'world' which it opens up and discloses" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 111) in front of me. Being a phenomenologist, I cannot but surrender to the calling of the evocative reverberation of the words *abundance* and *scarcity*. And so, I start this essay by taking a closer look at the two notions – as understood by Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford – and by me.

...

### **Abundance and Scarcity**

*We want to understand the human being from the meaningful ground structure of that totality of situations, events, and cultural values to which he is oriented and about which he has consciousness, and to which all his actions, thoughts, and feelings are related – this is the world in which the person exists, which he encounters in the course of his personal*

*history, and which he shapes through the meanings that he constructs and assigns to everything. The human person is not an “entity” with properties, but an initiative of relations to a world that he chooses and by which he is chosen. (Buytendijk, 1953, as quoted in Levering & van Manen 2001, p. 279)*

The hallmark of a curriculum of scarcity is, according to Jardine et al, that it is badly tainted by a market economy discourse. In a curriculum of scarcity, knowledge is seen as a commodity.

When the idea of scarcity insinuates itself into how we imagine the curriculum topics entrusted to teachers and students in schools, those topics become necessarily bounded in ways that make it possible to control, predict, assess, and monitor their production distribution, consumption, dispensation, and accumulation....Understanding thus becomes equated with “possession” and “dissemination”. Under the assumption of scarcity, curriculum topics must be broken down and doled out in carefully monitored, zero-sum exchanges. (p. 4)

A curriculum of scarcity is, contrary to the etymological roots of the word “scarce”, not “restricted in quantity”. At an ever accelerating speed, teachers and students alike are forced to race through their schooldays to meet the demands from educational acts, from politicians, and from headmasters to “cover the curriculum”. What counts is the pragmatic, immediate usefulness of knowledge, not *Bildung*. What counts is surface, not depth. What counts is quantity, not quality. What counts is gathering qualifications for a future life. There neither space nor time to dwell in the present.

The impact a curriculum of scarcity may have on children was vividly shown to me one morning as I opened my morning paper:

A Singapore mother who walked into her daughter’s room one day, just before the girl’s final examinations, witnessed a disturbing spectacle that left her badly shaken. Her teenage daughter had emptied a bottle of glue over her own head. She was furiously rubbing one of her textbooks over her head and repeating to herself: “Get in, get, get in.” (Srinivas, 2008, p. 4)

What *are* we doing to our children?

...

”Time is on my side”, The Rolling Stones sang in the mid sixties. How often do children experience that time is on their side? Is it not true that more often than not, children are chasing time or are being chased by time? Governmental, regional, and local documents regulate not only what courses and subjects students should or could take, they also stipulate how much time the students have at their disposal to complete their education. The school year is divided into semesters, the semesters into schooldays, and schooldays into lessons; forty minutes geography, sixty minutes math, a ten-minute brake. In addition, national as well as local tests are regularly administered in order to fix the students’ positions at certain times. Children, who are *behind* their assignments need to *catch up*, they



need to chase the children who are *ahead* of their assignments. Time inaugurated by institutions – schools for instance – and cultural values put emphasis on the punctuality, the linear time of qualification, the time-stress, and the feeling of permanent acceleration. The cultural time discourse (Lippitz, 2003) patrols the borders of a curriculum of scarcity. Oh yes, Chronos <sup>1</sup> is smiling.

When Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford introduce the idea of seeing curriculum *as* abundance, they offer a track beaten by Chronos' brother Kairos. Kairos time is a time and a space for contemplation and for wonder. At the heart of the concept of curriculum in abundance, as presented by Jardine et al, is a firm belief that:

...the topics entrusted to schools *are* abundant, and, therefore, suggestions of multiplicity and diversity are not opulent educational *options* regarding how we might come to know topics that are in reality simple and manageable. Rather, multiplicity, diversity, and abundance define the way in which things *are*, and therefore, the great array of the ways of traversing a place that students bring to the classroom is *precisely what living things require if they are to be "adequately" understood in their abundance*. In short, abundance is an ontological issue, not an epistemological one. (p. 88, italics in original)

To depict, initially, the difference between a curriculum of scarcity and a curriculum of abundance, Jardine et al uses the Pythagorean Theorem, which says: "The square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides", also expressed as:  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ . This is how students all over the world (probably) are introduced to geometry and right side triangles.  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$  is what you *use* to solve the problems presented by the teacher. But the Pythagorean Theorem is so much more than a *tool you use to solve* whatever problem the teacher or the textbook presents. The Pythagorean Theorem belongs to *the world in which we live!*

Back out on that cold noon-hour playground, a 12-year-old boy from this Grade 6 mathematics class was facing south, with his toes touching the end of the shadow of a pine tree directly south of where he was standing. I can only vaguely recount what he said. He talked about having been out here on this playground in the summer, and the shadows had been so short because of how high the sun was, and now, the shadows were so long and the sun was so low. He was recognizing, in part, the great arc of seasons, somehow, but then he said something that still haunts me to this day: "But Pythagoras says that something is still *the same*..." (p. 3, italics in original).

To further cultivate the image of "abundance", Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford draw upon three disciplines: ecology, Buddhism, and hermeneutics. From ecology the authors "adopt the idea any seemingly isolated thing on earth in fact is the nestling point of vast, living abundance of relations, generations, ancestries, and bloodlines" (p. 7) arguing with Berry (1983) that "Our knowledge of

the world instructs us first of all that the world is greater than our knowledge of it” (p. 8).

The second pillar is adopted from the Buddhist: “Within each dust mote is vast abundance”, which in this context signifies the opening up of a whole field of boundaries, borders, and transgression and is thus taken to be the opposite of a curriculum of scarcity.

Hermeneutics (especially the works of Gadamer) provides the third pillar. Gadamer, Jardine et al, argues offers us the means for a deeper understanding of life and the objects we come upon as something that is already there, “beyond our wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxviii).

At first glance, ecology, Buddhism, and hermeneutics read as a somewhat surprising mixture but at the same time Jardine et al offer convincing arguments for their choice of disciplines.

However, there are good reasons to rhetorically question the methodological framework, since there are alternatives that might be just as, or more, appropriate in an educational context. As a hermeneutic phenomenologist, I have no reason to question the choice of hermeneutics – especially not Gadamer. In addition Jardine et al have taken pains to carefully choose thoughts and quotes, which show how Gadamer’s hermeneutics can be useful to explore, question, and illuminate fundamental pedagogical issues.

As far as ecology is concerned, who would (dare) argue against its relevance, neither as a school subject nor as a way of understanding the world, in times of ecological disasters, climate changes, and exploitation of the Earth’s resources, in a world where we now see creations like “geeps”<sup>2</sup>, oncomouses, “Dollies”, and self-illuminating pigs? Even worse, the chimera technology<sup>3</sup> has the potential to turn Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* from a novel to a text book and the movie *The Fly* <sup>4</sup> from science fiction to documentary. Politically and legally, some states have, as Great Britain, approved inter-species experimentation, while the US has no laws to regulate it. Canada, by contrast, criminalized chimera technology in 2004. “The Canadians might well turn out to be the wiser people” (Ho, 2008, p. 13). The full ramifications of the ethical aspects of stem-cell science are yet to be seen – and lived.

No, my basic concern has to do with the second pillar: Buddhism. It is not unproblematic to apply eastern philosophy and religion on western thought, or transfer it into a western context; in this case a North American educational context. Especially when the Buddhism referred to by Jardine et al seems to be the watered down Neo-Buddhism, which has become so popular in the US and Canada. Here I would like to point to three troublesome aspects. First: one notion that Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford draw on is that of *shunyata* translated as “emptiness”. As Soeng (2000) observes, the word “emptiness” has a certain nihilistic undertone (which might be less desirable in the practice of pedagogy). Second, there is within the numerous orientations of Buddhism no consensus regarding the meaning or significance of the notion of “emptiness”. The Mahayana thought, for instance, is supported by developments in mathematics in India:

In the fourth century B.C.E., the linguist Panini had developed the concept of zero (Sanskrit, *shunya*) to symbolize empty but functioning positions in his

analysis of Sanskrit grammar. (He proposed that every word was composed of a root and a suffix, so words without suffixes actually had the zero suffix.) Mathematicians eventually borrowed the concept to supply an essential principle of the decimal notation we use today: that a place in a system may be empty (like the zeros in 10,000) but can still function in relationship to the rest of the system. (Soeng, 2000, p. 42)

So, when Jardine and Batycky argues that “in their deepest reality, all worldly things are ‘vacant thrones’” (p. 222), they overlook that worldly things may, according to Mahayana Buddhist thought, have a zero suffix; a suffix that in spite of its emptiness functions in relationship to the rest of the world. Transferred to an educational context, let’s argue that a curriculum of scarcity has a zero suffix. Yet it has a function in relationship to the rest of the educational and political system (or rather is the result of the current educational climate). In other words, not only abundance shows the interdependency of this world, so does scarcity.

My third problem with Jardine et al leaning on the Buddhist *abundance* has less to do with methodological considerations, and more with epistemological and pragmatic concerns. How are we to understand the fact that Asian countries like China, and Singapore, in spite of their cultural, philosophical and religious inheritance (such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism) have what are probably the world’s most competitive, outcome- and assessment driven educational systems? Obviously, if Buddhism – in *its* abundance – cannot steer education away from curricula of scarcity, are we to believe that Jardine’s, Friesen’s, and Clifford’s “threads of Buddhist philosophy” (p. 8) can “do the work”?<sup>5</sup>

We face yet another predicament attached to singling out one of many concepts in a philosophy. Buddhism, in all its possible attraction, contains some serious contradictions which, from a pedagogical perspective, collide with the notion of abundance. For instance:

In the West, they compare Buddhism with various schools of philosophical thought, formulating reasons in terms of logic and raising questions as, “Why is it like that?” and, “Why is it like this?” When an answer is provided, then comes another question: “Again, why, then, is it like that?”.... This is sheer nonsense. (Koffman & Liamsiriwattana, 2006, p. 42).

There are within Buddhist writings several references to how too much knowledge steers us away from grasping the true nature of the things in our world. For instance:

We need not know everything... For much information is irrelevant. We must know only the things that are necessary to understand, that ought to be known, and that when known, liberate the mind from all problems. (Asalaha Puja Season, 1988, p. 15)

Of course, writings like the above open up for a discussion on the nature of knowledge and the difference between knowledge and information, but my point here is that even a Buddhist stance could be used to justify a curriculum of scarcity.



## Methodological underpinnings

In an article in *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, Jardine (1988) expressed a certain uneasiness he felt about phenomenology. Although, Jardine acknowledged Husserl's "seemingly liberating effects of the phenomenological turn from objectivistic, methodological inquiry to a reflective inquiry into everyday life, into the complex and rich contours of our lived experience of the world" (p. 158), he questioned a phenomenology that sidesteps the scientific theories (such as theories of child development) curriculum guides, administrative and bureaucratic forms of accountability. And he goes on to say:

In reaching out to understand the lived character of pedagogy, we experience, as a feature of that lived character, the call for behaviora objectives, administrative accountability, and the mandatory tests given at the end of grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 in Alberta. Seeing phenomenology as the opportunity to *purge* discourse of such residues, such indebtedness, turns it into nothing other than a vague romanticism which turns its back on the pedagogical *moment* by turning that moment into an idealistic ghost. (p.160, italics in original)

With *Curriculum in Abundance* Jardine et al present us with a very phenomenological message (albeit dressed in hermeneutics, ecology, and Buddhism) which assigns value not just to the pedagogical moment but also to the larger context of the pedagogical situation.

Like true phenomenologists Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford, unveil that "everything", which is hidden behind the seemingly "nothing". Through their explorations, curriculum subjects are transformed from scarcity to abundance and they beautifully show that curriculum subjects exist interdependently in time, space, and relations; they already hold in themselves a world of meanings. As I read the text, I see the ghosts (to speak "Jardinian") of Husserl's epistemology, Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's ontology, Sartre's existentialism, the ethics of Levinas and Løgstrup, and Marcel's Christian existentialism.

One key notion in phenomenology and phenomenological research is that of *lived experience* and even if Jardine et al seem reluctant to acknowledge the significance of lived experiences, we do *have* them and they shape our life world. The problem with lived experiences is not whether we have them or not, but that they often hide deep down in our memory where they sometimes stubbornly resist our struggle to bring them to light so we can reflect on and articulate them. For me, many of the chapters in *Curriculum in Abundance* reads as hermeneutic-phenomenological descriptions of lived experiences of *living* (through) a curriculum of abundance. I doubt that Jardine, Friesen and Clifford would deny that they lived through the lectures and pedagogical moments described in the book without temporal, spatial, relational, and embodied experiences<sup>6</sup>. Finally, Jardine's<sup>7</sup> language is as evocative, poetic, and seductive as any text written by scholars in the so-called Utrecht orientation of phenomenology. So why not call a phenomenological project a

phenomenological project, I wonder? However, the fact that Jardine et al prefer to ground the notion of abundance in ecology, Buddhism, and the hermeneutics of Gadamer, does not in any way diminish the value of what is being said. And it is precisely to *what* the authors say (and not *how* and on what methodological groundsthey say it) I now will turn my attention.

...

## The Dwellers

*If we forget that we dwell with children in the deep resonances of language and experience, we can forget our kinship with children. In becoming estranged from our kinship with children (with the fact that they are our “kind”), they can become our strange and silent objects, ones that have nothing of their own to say, ones we must now instruct without feeling the need to listen to the unvoiced experiences they have already undergone.*(Jardine, 1990, p. 185)

*We need a place to dwell. If we do not have an place to live in, your body will be as if it were homeless. (The 24 dimensions of Dhamma, 2005, p.17)*

Children are masters when it comes to living in the present. Children direct their minds and their bodies to the Now, in a way that adults rarely do (van den Berg, 1959). Contemporary society – and school – rarely offers children a chance to dwell in the present and yet, children naturally embrace the present. As we grow older this talent for living in the present seem to fade away or vanish completely. Even worse, we often find it hard even to recollect what it felt like being a child or a teenager If I cannot recall the joy of jumping in water puddles, if I cannot remember the mystery that lurched in the woods, or the joy of racing down the street on my new bicycle; if I cannot recall the tears over my dead dog, the shame I felt when my parents caught me smoking or the thrill of the first kiss – moments when time lingered – what kind of teacher am I? Although I finished my teacher training more than twenty years ago, I remember the focus on method (anything from how to make nice, multiple-layer overheads to strategies for teaching literature). I also remember our lectures on pedagogy and how they targeted children’s psychological and mental development (Piaget, Kohlberg, Maslow etc.). On one occasion our professor retold a story from a second grade classroom: The teacher had asked a class of first or second graders to draw a picture of a human face. When one boy raised his hand and asked: “Should I paint it from the outside or from the inside?” he was scolded by his teacher: “Don’t ask stupid questions, Marcus. From the outside, of course!” I vaguely recall that our professor thought that the boy’s question was a nice example of some stage in a child’s mental development. What I vividly recall is how odd and excluded I felt when I could not join my fellow student teachers in their laughter. For me the story was not a laughing matter. To me, the boy’s question posed some important pedagogical questions but it also touched the fundamentals of ontology and epistemology. “From the outside or from the inside?” Obviously, Marcus was addressed by the task to draw a face; the face being a thing “thinging” (Heidegger, 2001). The abundance of that question! How could a teacher receive this question without welcoming the world hidden within this “gift”? Why did the teacher not experience “a sense of something happening, something arriving, something starting to open up, something stirring, becoming enlivened, lively” (p. 40)? How did this



child encounter the task of drawing a human head? What images came before him? What space did he and the thing dwell in and what did he experience when the thing was “thinging”? Thinging, Heidegger (1971) says, “the thing stays the united four, earth and sky, divinities and mortals in the simple onefold of their self-unified fourfold (p. 175-176), “the fouring presences as the wordling of world” (p. 178). Heidegger goes on to describe that within these united four are fruits, water, rock, plant and animal; here we find the sun’s path, the course of the moon, the glitter of the stars, the year’s seasons, and the blue depth of the ether. For Marcus, who was addressed by the face, the thing was “thinging”; it had not been fixed, locked in, determined. The teacher, on the other hand seems to be deaf to the “thinging” of the thing; it is already been made definite, nicely wrapped in scarcity. When the teacher sneered at Marcus’ question, was he aware of the world he denied the young boy to dwell in?

This brief moment during a lecture in pedagogy, which took place so long ago, has stayed with me since and it was also the first memory of epiphany moments that returned to me when I started to read *Curriculum in Abundance*.

While this anecdote<sup>8</sup> (which really is a story within a story) may, for some teachers, be nothing but a nice teacher story “that educators love to tell each other” (p. 40), it may for other teachers be an epiphany moment experienced as a need to act upon the question. In the hands of a sensitive pedagogue, the anecdote transgresses the boundaries of an amusing story and imposes an ethical demand, brought forward by a question from a child. We could thus argue that in pedagogical practice when teachers are unexpectedly confronted (“From the outside or the inside?”) they are forced to respond to this calling on the spur of the moment. The response may be wise; it may be in the best interest of the child but it may just as well be unwise, unreflected, and – at worst – harmful. Now, on the surface, the question posed by the boy is nothing more than a question of how to draw or a way for the boy to check that he has understood the task. But there is so much more at stake here:

By our very attitude to one another we help to shape one another’s world. By our attitude to the other person we help to determine the scope and hue of his world; we make it large or small, bright or drab, rich or dull, threatening or secure. We help to shape his world not by theories and views but by our very attitude toward him. Herein lies the unarticulated and one might say anonymous demand that we take care of the life which trust has placed in our hands. (Løgstrup, 1971, p.19)

By scolding the boy for asking a stupid question, his teacher did indeed make the boy’s world small, drab, and dull. No space for “adventure of inquiry....rejoicing in the abundance and intricacy of the world, entering into its living questions, living debates, living inheritances” (p. 101). We can only imagine how many ways of the world that was left uncovered, unexplored in the teachers “Don’t ask stupid questions, Marcus. From the outside, of course!”

According to Jardine et al, the premise of classroom inquiries, which are based on a sense of abundance, is: “Whenever you come upon even the seemingly most trivial of things, it can be experienced, or taken up, or read, or treated as a way into the ways of the world” (p. 100). As an example Jardine et al introduces Anh Linh a Grade 9 student, “who came upon the inner geometries of the Pythagorean

Theorem” (p. 15). Anh Linh was not content to stay within the borders of drawing a right side triangle but started to create a series of right-angle triangles, which, as she went along, took the form of beautiful spirals. Suddenly, math had become an intriguing, living matter. The description and depiction of Anh Linh’s drawings are indeed evocative and brings to my mind Alan Block’s (2004) “study, like prayer, is a stance we assume in the world” (p. 2). The story about Anh Linh’s spirals serves as an excellent example of what Jardine et al mean with the notion “curriculum in abundance”.

However, I cannot help but wonder: How about other subjects? Does the abundance “hide” just as well in other school subjects? As a (former) language teacher and as a teacher in literature I am inclined to say: No. That is not to say that all language/literature teachers see their subjects as abundant, but the abundance of, let’s say the literature of the Classical era, does not hide as cleverly as the Pythagorean Theorem. Literature opens up for understanding other times, other cultures, architecture (what did the buildings look like?), art (what motifs were popular? How were they expressed?), music (who were the composers? How did the music sound?), social sciences (what were the social, religious, and economic conditions?). Literature, in its abundance, invites us to inhabit (for a while) worlds other than that of the written word.

...

### **The world we live in**

*So this is Earth. This is the home of humans. I must have landed on the wrong globe. It is so strange here. (Obstfelder, 1893, my translation)*

*The world of the school must be understood as sharing a unity with the world as a whole. It is not some isolated place separated from the real world, a place of preparation for reality (Smith, 1988, p. 109).*

As Dewey (1964) pointed out, before we start to philosophize about what schools *should be*, we need to discover what schools are *really like*. I am sure that Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford are not ignorant, and that they do in fact know what school often is like and that school is not untouched by the surrounding society. However, discussions on the relationship between school and the surrounding world are surprisingly scarce in their book.

In the chapter called “The individual Student” Jardine suggests that instead of focusing on each individual student’s understanding as a property belonging to a specific student, we should treat the understanding of that student as “an understanding *of* (i.e. belonging properly to) *the place*. Put differently: “Each student’s voice and work and knowledge and questioning is located, therefore, nor in their ‘genius’...but rather ‘in the abundance of the topic of which they are giving a voice, the place in which their work appears, what it is they have knowledge of and questions about. It is treated *pedagogically* rather than *pathologically* (p. 230). At first glance, this approach is very appealing. It sounds like good advice to teachers to let the topic be in focus, to turn our attention to *what* is being said instead of *who* is saying it. The advice is quite in line with chapter 8 of the book

which, according to the headline, is “A Cautionary Tale About Constructivism” – and with Jardine’s criticism of “the Romantic visions of ‘each individual child’” (p. 196). But what do we ask of our students when we ask them to distance themselves from the knowledge and the questions they have; when we ask them to focus on the topic and forget about *their* (life) world filled with distractions, fears, pleasures, questions, and insecurities? Do we not, then, ask them to transform themselves from “children of and in this world” to mere “students in school”?

Jardine notices that many of the teachers and students he has met labor “under the terrible burden of the belief in a world that doesn’t fit together” (p. 100). Well, for some children the world *doesn’t* fit – at all. Children today worry. Unfortunately, they often have a right to worry. The world is not a very safe place for any of us, children and adults alike.

To this day, I remember the first school-shooting (that this is now a word says something about our society) that took place in the US. Not just because of the horror I felt, but because of the Swedish news anchor. She signed off by leaning forward, her eyes steadfast into the camera: “To all children, who are watching this I want to say: This is very, very unusual. It is *not* dangerous to go to school.” Approximately ten years later, we know that it is no longer “very, very unusual”. It happens repeatedly and not just in the US. Sweden, as many other countries around the world, has seen violent attacks within schools. Schools have been forced to install metal detectors, British schools provide their staff with body armour to protect them when they search pupils for weapons and in connection to that the Professional Association of Teachers added: “Rather than just conducting a weapons search, the process should be risk-assessed” (BBC News). Teaching as risk-assessed... We have come a long way from the original task of a pedagogue: to lead a child.

However, school-shootings are probably not what troubles children most on an everyday basis. There are plenty more to worry about; things which make it almost impossible to focus on contributing with a voice on a topic:

A young boy, about seven or eight years old, apparently dreaming, looks out of the classroom window. The teacher notices him and says “Richard, try to concentrate!” The little boy tries to focus, but says quietly to himself: “Everybody says that I have difficulties to concentrate, but that is not true – it is just that I concentrate on the wrong things.” Richard is thinking about his mother. Will she be sober when he gets home from school? Would he maybe dare bring a friend home? (Jenner, 2001, *my translation*)

My point is here that what happens outside school does not stop at the school door; it always manages to sneak in. Jardine et al acknowledge this, when they, in spite of their criticism of treating children’s understanding of a topic pathologically, admit:

Each individual student will make sense of his or her venture in his or her own ways. As the saying goes, each student “brings to” this topography different backgrounds, experiences, skills, “interests”, likes and dislikes, hopes, boredoms, learning style, family troubles, previous schoolexperiences, and so on.



Children bring a lot of worries and problems to school and sometimes teacher as aware of the problems. With Richard we get to know what is bothering him and why he sometimes finds it hard or even impossible, to focus. But sometimes teachers come across children, who, in spite of the teacher's wish to do what is pedagogically best for that specific child remain mysteries. When this happens we are sometimes forced to actually focus on the individual child and not on what that child brings or – as in the case with Darren, who we get to meet in chapter 18, – what they cannot bring.

...

### The individual student

*Teaching is even more difficult than learning We know that; but we rarely think about it. And why is teaching more difficult than learning? Not because the teacher must have a larger store of information, and have it always ready. Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than – learning.*(Heidegger, 1968, p. 15)

Darren, a primary school student, “*didn't not know his alphabet, he couldn't write, making marks on paper was a challenge, and he was barely talking*” (p. 247-248, italics in original). The teacher goes on to say that nothing she had done so far had solved anything for Darren. Nor had any specialists offered “*anything that Darren would respond to without wrapping him up in labels and languages that made everything his problem*” (p. 248, italics in original).

Suddenly, one day, with the help of a scribe, he produced the poem:

*The hot sun is like the Mojave Desert.  
The sun is a beautiful colour of gold.  
The mountain peaks are covered  
With a small double wizard of snow.  
I walked across the bridge  
And smelled the trees.  
The mountain has purple shadows on it.  
The wind is blowing just a little bit.  
A fat mountain is right in front of me, it's huge  
(p. 248- 249, italics in original).*

Presented with Darren and his poem, a group of student teachers' main concern was: “*...did he actually write this or did someone write it for him?*” (p. 249, italics in original). Had it not been for Darren's teacher and how she understood Darren and his poem in an interpretive way, the child would have remained Darren, the boy whose handwriting is terrible. The beautiful world and the deep feelings, which were hidden behind a terrible handwriting, would have been lost. By treating Darren, his handwriting, and his poem interpretatively, his teacher discovered where Darren *was at*; Darren received a *place* but also a *space*, in which he himself no longer was the sole owner of his problem. He was no longer a child *with* difficulties, but a child *in* difficulties. There are, however, one thing that makes me feel a bit uneasy when I read the description of Darren and the reflections made by Jardine et al.

It is true that when we label a child with a diagnosis, we risk that the child *becomes* it diagnosis and that everything that the child says, does, or thinks is referred to and understood in light of that

diagnosis. By paying too much attention to diagnoses and labels we risk that the teacher's *look* becomes psychological or medical instead of pedagogical. Nevertheless, had Darren been diagnosed with, for instance, dyslexia, surely that would have made both Darren and his teacher better equipped to deal with his problem.

There are but few children, who are so visible and rapidly seen as those who fall outside the so-called normality. However, the look of the teacher is not like the look of anyone. The look of the teacher is expected to have a certain professional quality. Teachers are supposed to have a *pedagogical look*, a look that is at the same time *seeing* and *nonseeing*. Sometimes, however, this *seeing* needs to possess a certain *blindness*, a seeing that is blind to certain qualities or non-qualities in the student-teacher relationship (Henriksson, 2008). "Pedagogical seeing is protectively blind ... and constantly strives to strengthen and enable the student. The pedagogical look passes over what should be acknowledged and recognized but not called attention to" (Saevi, 2005, p. 164).

Jardine et al present the story about Darren as a means to highlight that "In an inquiry, this commonplace about the 'individual student' doesn't disappear. Constructivism isn't simply and easily just *false*. Rather, its truth must be treated carefully (p. 229, italics in original). Yet, constructivism continues to haunt educational thought and pedagogical practice through the notion the "individual child".

During the last decades, Sweden has taken this notion to undreamt-of "lows" by, more or less, leaving democratic aspects of education behind in favour of individualism, the current, educational gospel being that we all are the architects of our *own* fortune. This centre of attention (i.e. the students' 'genius' instead of what they can bring to the topic at hand) has left children abandoned, pedagogically "orphanized" with no one and nowhere to turn to except their own resources. What we in fact say to our children is:

In this world even we are not very securely at home;  
how to move about in it, what to know, what skills to  
master, are mysteries to us too. You must try to make  
out as best you can; in any case you are not entitled to  
call us to account. We are innocent, we wash our hands  
of you (Arendt, 1993, p. 191)

Returning to the story about Darren, that wonderfully creative little boy, the unique child, there is still one question unanswered: What does it take for a teacher, beside interpretive skills, to make practical choices in pedagogical situations, which call for action, action that aims at the best for the child? It requires, according to Polkinghorne (2004) "a kind of thought that can deal with complex and competing goals and take into account the timing and context of the action, as well as the uniqueness and particular characteristics of the situation and person for whom the action is undertaken (p. 21). But what kind of thought might that be? Perhaps Galvin and Todres (2007) can contribute to *one* way of expressing that thought:

Applying this to a kind of scholarship that is a seamless movement of head, hand and heart would mean that the ongoing learning and opportunities within our professional and personal lives could 'settle.' The importance of 'settling' as a kind of clearing that allows integration to be, does not eradicate the value of pursuing specialized developments or the activity of relating these developments to one another. Rather, it

offers some relief that striving in a specialized way is not the only path to productivity – that our unspecialized capacities for being can be productive. (p. 38)

The suggestion that we see scholarship and our task as teacher as a seamless movement of head, hand, and heart is appealing, wise, and fruitful. And, I believe a suitable formulation to describe the gist of the message in *Curriculum in Abundance*.

...

### End bit

*Each fall the children must endure together what every child also endures alone: Learning the alphabet, the integers. Three dozen bits and pieces of stuff so arbitrary, so preemptory that worlds invisible and visible bow down before it, as in Joseph's dream. The sheaves bowed down and then the stars bowed down before the dreaming of a little boy that dream got him such hatred of his brothers as cost the greater part of life to mend, and yet great kindness came of it in the end. (Nemerov, 1977, as quoted in The Nation's Favourite Poems of Childhood)*

In the preface to *Curriculum in Abundance*, David Jardine says: "In these school days of hyperactivity, my age might be showing. I am much more in love now with happening upon the slow pull of things" (p. xxiii). Yes, David Jardine, I think maybe our age is showing. We are probably both preparing to take the leap from what Kierkegaard (1843; 1845) called the ethical stage to the religious stage while our students are still tumbling around in the aesthetic stage. This discrepancy has some implications. Children and teenagers live life at a speed, which is "endemic to what is now widely described as postmodern culture in North America: an onslaught of frantic, disconnected, fragmented images and free-floating meanings" (p. 181), while their ageing teachers prefer to let the grass dry in the sun, before bringing it into the barn (Buber, 1929).

Does that mean that *Curriculum in Abundance* is a project doomed to failure? That we might as well surrender to the mad pace of postmodernity and accept a curriculum of scarcity? Absolutely not. What I am saying is that it makes teaching curriculum subjects more challenging (but also more rewarding!). We would do well to simultaneously lower our expectations of immediate results and prepare for some hard work. Changes, not even the necessary ones, come easy. School teachers, who take the idea of curriculum in abundance to their heart – and the practice of it to their classrooms – are bound to meet students, parents, and colleagues who will sneer at, or even reject, the thought of treating curriculum subjects as abundant. Likewise, I fear that teacher educators even in the future will encounter teacher students, who argue that they will "stick with the more standard stuff" (p. 100) until they get more experienced.

I also fear that the message of *Curriculum in Abundance* in some quarters might be dismissed, as what Jardine (1988) once claimed phenomenology to be: "vague romanticism", which turns the pedagogical moment into "an idealistic ghost". Idealistic it might be, but then, when did it become blameworthy to have ideals? And who is the judge? A ghost it is not. A quite different metaphor comes to mind: a benevolent spirit hovering above us, searching for an abode



in school; waiting to be invited in by teachers, who will care for it with a seamless movement of head, hand and heart.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Chronos, according to Greek mythology, was the keeper of objective time. He was also, as noted by Jardine et al, known for “consuming his children” (p. 175).

<sup>2</sup>In 1984, the Danish scientist Steen Willadsen created a hybrid animal with a goat head and an upper torso covered with sheep’s wool while the rest of its body is a mix of goat and sheep.

<sup>3</sup>The chimera technology allows scientists to incorporate genetic material from humans into animals and vice versa.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the short story *The Fly* by George Langelaan.

<sup>5</sup>Admittedly, Confucianism has also a long history of testing and evaluation of students and citizens. See for instance Li (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Temporality, spatiality, relationality, and corporeality are four existentials, suggested by van Manen (1997), which seem to be the ground for how we experience the world.

<sup>7</sup>Out of the 19 chapters Jardine is the sole author of 11 chapters, first author of 6, and co-author of 2 chapters. Hence the reference to Jardine only.

<sup>8</sup>Here I, like Jardine et al, take the notion of anecdote as an amusing story and not as a methodological device as developed by van Manen (1997).

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