



Cap sur l'école inclusive
en Europe



Resource sheet

Being convinced of every child's Educability : a prerequisite for teaching

Section of the module / D

Among all great pedagogues, from Comenius and Itard, to Montessori and Freinet, a common characteristic is to be found: the firm belief in every child's educability.

This belief is not supported by any scientific evidence. It is rather a postulate that every teacher and every researcher must have in mind to fulfill his/her educational mission, adapt to the multiplicity and diversity of educational challenges that are proposed to him/her, and innovate to be more successful.

The example of Victor, the wild child from Aveyron, which Jean ITARD undertook to educate, is one of the most edifying one to convince of everybody's educability.

At the end of the nineteenth century in the south of France, a young child that probably was cognitively deficient, was abandoned naked by his parents, in the wilderness. For 3 years he wandered in the forest, in the wild. Captured several times he managed to escape each time. But in the year 1800, when winter was particularly harsh, the child took refuge by a village dweller. Entrusted to specialists, he was quickly diagnosed as "an idiot by birth", unable to speak and unfit for all life in society.

Jean Gaspard ITARD then 25 years old, specialist of deaf-mutes, got interested in the case of this child whom he named Victor.

Although he undoubtedly failed in his secret aim of giving language to this child, his educational action however had very significant results:

- he became able to do housework, like setting the table
- he was able to do other gardening work (digging up) or cut wood
- he made tremendous progress in socialization
- he was by then able to show empathy

Although the final result did not fully satisfy ITARD's ambition, the path traveled by young Victor is enormous, when one imagines the psychological (and probably physical) traumas that this child suffered, even if it is nowadays impossible to decide on his ability to speak.

To achieve this result, ITARD was inventive in creating educational tools adapted to the child. Maria MONTESSORI recognized ITARD as a forerunner, from which she drew inspiration.

Victor is probably an extreme case, which is unlikely to be met again in contemporary European society. The means employed to educate him have been considerable and out of reach for however sophisticated a school system could be. However it shows that education can bring significant progress, if we do not give up the proposed challenge, with a definitive, but too often heard sentence: "for this child, there is nothing one can do"....

To fulfill his/her educational mission, the teacher must demonstrate a particular state of mind and deploy qualities that become rare in our modern society, where appearances and obsession with standard and statistical results may count more than anything else.

Philippe MEIRIEU, specialist in pedagogy, University Professor in educational sciences at Lyon-II University (France), rightly analyzes these qualities, and lays down the principles that must support any pedagogical ambition:

"Educability is first and foremost the "logical" principle of all educational activity: if one does not postulate that the subjects one wants to educate are educable, better change one's occupation. It is also an essential heuristic principle: only postulating the other's educability prohibits the educator from systematically assigning his/her failures to causes over which he/she has no power and from engaging in the obstinate search for new mediations. This is no doubt why the vast majority of "didactic inventions" were made by those who tried to educate people that were hitherto deemed non-educable. But the affirmation of the other's educability is also, paradoxically, a sign of modesty: it forbids the definitive closing of its future by condemning it to being only a duplication of its past; it leaves open the possibility for a change, a success, a redemption, about which we well know, in human register, that they can always occur. The postulate of educability is, finally, a kind of "effective eye" insofar it communicates to the other, most often without our knowledge of it, an image of itself to which we well know that he often has a tendency to conform. But the principle of educability can, one feels it well, lead to worrying drifts: we know what happens when we aim at educating "whatever it costs": violence is not far, exclusion sometimes, "re-education" from time to time. The trap, in Education, is confusing the formation of a person with the making of an object, not tolerating that the other could escape us, recuse him/herself ... and abandoning the principle of educability when the other does not pay us back the effort made for him/her by his/her gratitude, submission or success. The real educational challenge is that of educability associated with that of non-reciprocity: doing everything so that the other succeeds, persisting in inventing every possible means for him/her to learn but knowing that he/she is the one learning and that, while demanding the best, I must prepare to accept the worst ... and especially to continue to demand the best after accepting the worst! Admitting that the principle of educability is constantly defeated without, however, giving up. Assuming the negativity of educability, without, however, falling into spite and sufficiency, without sinking into fatalism.

The principle of educability and its corollary, the principle of non-reciprocity, are therefore at the heart of the pedagogical dynamic, they constitute, in a way, the founding bet ... Ethical and political choices at the same time, they are, in reality, the real "touchstone" of many of the debates that would be useful for the clarity of the current discussion, to bring out this dimension of things systematically.

What is at stake, basically, through the status of pedagogical research, if not the position we take on these two essential questions: am I ready to bet on everybody's educability and to put into practice all the knowledge that I have and all the imagination I can do to achieve it? Am I willing to accept that the other could escape my project, does not pay me back in gratitude or submission, can emerge from my influence ... without, however, blame him/her or give up my determination? "

Philippe MEIRIEU

According to Philippe MEIRIEU, to teach, one must combine rare qualities: obstinacy without falling into an unethical pursuit, a sense of observation, inventiveness, but also modesty, the faculty of questioning oneself, the acceptance of failure without blaming it on the other and without giving up one's mission ... Being a pedagogue means being inhabited by the principle of educability, while accepting the principle of non-reciprocity.

Undoubtedly an ungrateful work, but when one tackles difficult cases with creativity, the least progress is a small victory, infinitely more savory than the ordinary success achieved by the Stakhanovist methods of mass education.

