

Why the form of teaching matters: Defending the integrity of education and of the work of teachers beyond agendas and good intentions¹

Por qué la forma de la enseñanza importa: una defensa de la integridad de la educación y del trabajo de los profesores más allá de programas y buenas intenciones

DOI: 10.4438/1988-592X-RE-2022-395-519

Gert Biesta

Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy, Maynooth University

Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh

Abstract

If we understand the good of education exclusively in terms of intentions and agendas, there remains a risk that education *itself* – which is first of all about the work done day in day out by teachers in schools, colleges, and universities – is entirely understood and approached in instrumental terms, that is, as the way in which particular intentions and ambitions are to be achieved. The problem here is not just that even with a broad understanding of what education is supposed to be for, the discussion can quickly move back to technical questions about effectiveness and efficiency. The problem is also that in such an approach it remains difficult to articulate the ‘integrity’ of education itself which, in turn, makes it difficult for education to resist when it is being asked to do things that would go against its integrity. In this paper I explore the question whether the

¹ A first version of this article was presented at the occasion of the international symposium “Exploring What Is Common and Public in Teaching Practices” held online 24 and 25 May 2021 as part of the ongoing activities of the research project #LobbyingTeachers (reference: PID2019-104566RA-I00/AEI/10.13039/501100011033). The Spanish translation of this final version has been funded as part of the internationalization strategy of the project.

integrity of education may perhaps have to do with the specific form of education rather than with the aims and purposes that frame educational activities. The paper consists of a detailed reconstruction of the work of the German educational Klaus Prange who has put forward the idea that the distinctiveness of education lies in its mode of operation, where he suggests that the most central form is that of pointing. I argue, with Prange, that a focus on the form of education allows for a different way to resist attempts to undermine the public and democratic orientation of education.

Key words: the integrity of education, the form of education, teaching, pointing, attention formation, Klaus Prange, the work of teachers.

Resumen

Si entendemos el bien de la educación exclusivamente en términos de intenciones y agendas, existe el riesgo de que la educación *en sí misma* (la cual trata en primer lugar del trabajo que realizan día a día los profesores en las escuelas, colegios y universidades), se entienda y sea abordada en términos instrumentales, es decir, como la vía por la que se deben lograr intenciones y ambiciones particulares. El problema aquí no es solo que, incluso con una comprensión amplia de para qué se supone que es la educación, la discusión pueda volver rápidamente a cuestiones técnicas sobre eficacia y eficiencia. El problema también reside en que en ese enfoque sigue siendo difícil articular la “integridad” de la educación en sí misma, lo que, a su vez, dificulta que la educación se resista cuando se le pide que haga cosas que irían en contra de su propia integridad. En este artículo exploro la cuestión de si la integridad de la educación tal vez tenga que ver con la forma específica de enseñar más que con los objetivos y propósitos que enmarcan las actividades educativas. El artículo consiste en una reconstrucción detallada del trabajo del educador alemán Klaus Prange, quien ha planteado la idea de que el carácter distintivo de la educación radica en su modo de funcionamiento, donde sugiere que la forma más central es la de señalar. Sostengo, con Prange, que centrarnos en la forma de la educación hace posible un modo diferente de resistir los intentos de socavar la orientación pública y democrática de la educación.

Palabras clave: integridad de la educación, forma de educación, enseñanza, señalar, educación de la atención, Klaus Prange, el trabajo de los profesores.

Introduction: The problem with agendas

The question as to what education is supposed to be *for*, continues to capture the attention of many (see Biesta 2015a; 2020a). If there has ever been a time when schools were just left alone, our time is definitely *not* such a time. Politicians, policy makers, researchers, educational publishers and companies, NGOs, supra-national organisations, the media, and the public all seem to have strong opinions about what education should aim for and what it should achieve. On the one hand there is an ongoing *narrowing* of the agenda for education, tying it to economic productivity, nationalist values, or high performance in league tables. On the other hand there is also an ongoing attempt at *broadening* education's agenda, for example in terms of personal well-being, social and environmental justice, democracy, and peace. While we could hope for the emergence of a hegemony in which broader, more meaningful, more public, and more democratic agendas prevail, and while it remains important to work on the emergence of such a hegemony, there remains a problem.

If we understand the good of education exclusively in terms of the agendas it is supposed to deliver, there remains a risk that education *itself* – which is first of all about the work done day in day out by teachers in schools, colleges, and universities – is entirely understood and approached in instrumental terms, that is, as the way in which particular ambitions are to be achieved (see also Biesta in press[a]). The problem here is not just that even with a broad understanding of what education is supposed to be for, the discussion can quickly move back to technical questions about effectiveness and efficiency, particularly in the form of the ubiquitous but deeply problematic 'what works'-question (see Smeyers & Depaepe 2006; Biesta 2007). The problem is also that in such an approach it remains difficult to articulate the integrity of education *itself* which, in turn, makes it difficult for educators to offer resistance when they are being asked to do things that would go against the integrity of their practice.²

² The use of the word 'integrity' is not meant to suggest that there is some eternal, God-given truth about what education is and what it is not. It is rather meant to raise the question at which point we might feel that what is being asked from education goes against the very 'point' of education. Such a question is not dissimilar from questions medical doctors encounter when they are being asked, for example, to perform a cosmetic procedure that is technically possible but seems pointless from a medical point of view. I think it is important to ask the question, but am of course aware that the answer to it will be a matter of ongoing debate.

Put differently: if education's 'duty to resist' (Meirieu 2007) only has to do with the question which agenda(s) should prevail, teachers may be one voice in this discussion, but not necessarily a voice that carries any special weight. More worryingly, if the good of education is just understood as a matter of agendas, the work of teachers is all too easily conceived in merely technical terms, that is, as a matter of delivering particular agendas or outcomes. This severely undermines their opportunities for enacting a broad rather than merely technicist conception of their professionalism (see Biesta in press[b]), which, as a concern, is definitely not of a recent date (see, for example, Ball 1995; Hodkinson 1998).

The question how the integrity of education itself can be safeguarded is not new. In the history of modern education, J.-F. Herbart is one of the first who explicitly thematised this issue by trying to articulate the 'proper concepts' of education (in German: 'einheimische Begriffe'), that is, those concepts that uniquely belong to education of education and are distinctive of it. For Herbart these included the idea of 'educability' ('Bildsamkeit'), that is, the assumption that human beings can be educated, and the idea of teaching ('Unterricht') (see Herbart 1989, p. 8). Herbart's attempt is perhaps more interesting than what proponents of German 'geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik' did in the early decades of the 20th century, because their emphasis on 'emancipation' as the proper *interest* of education in a sense turned the discussion back to the question of the appropriate agenda for education (see Biesta 2011).

In short, then, if the discussion about the good of education only focuses on the nature of the 'good' – the question of what education is *for* – but forgets to ask about the 'education-part,' so to speak, there is a real chance that even with the best intentions education remains the plaything of what 'others' want from it. This at least suggests that in addition to the question of the *good* of good education there is also a need to explore the *education-part* of good education, and it is this question which I will focus on in this paper. I will do this by means of a discussion of an interesting line of thought developed by the German educational scholar Klaus Prange, who has argued that what is proper and distinctive about education and therefore has something to do with education's integrity, does not lie in the agendas that give direction to education, but rather is to be found in the particular *forms* of the practice

of education itself and, more specifically, in what Prange refers to as the distinctive *operations* of teaching.

In his 'operational theory of education' Prange suggests that rather than trying to identify the proper concepts of education, we should start from identifying the proper *operations* of education ('die einheimische Operationen'). More simply than Herbart, Prange suggests that at bottom there is only *one* properly educational operation, namely that of 'Zeigen,' which has to do both with pointing and with showing (see Prange 2011; 2012a; 2012b; Prange & Strobel-Eisele 2006).³ According to Prange, pointing is not just *fundamental* for education, but also *essential*, which is why he argues that without pointing there is no education. ("Wenn es das Zeigen nicht gibt, dann auch keine Erziehung." – see Prange 2012a, p. 25). So what, then, does Prange's operational theory of education entail, and how can it help us to think about the good of education beyond the articulation of agendas *for* education which, as I have mentioned, always run the risk of turning education into an instrument and teachers into technicians?

In what follows I will reconstruct Prange's theory in three steps. I start with an exploration of Prange's ideas about pointing as the basic operation of education. I then discuss his ideas about the relationship between teaching and learning. In the third step, I outline his views about the intrinsic morality of education. In the final section I return to the overall theme of this paper and discuss in what ways Prange's ideas can be helpful in pushing back against the instrumentalisation of education and the reduction of teachers to technicians.

³ The German word 'Zeigen' can be translated as 'pointing' and as 'showing'. I will translate it as 'pointing' because I believe that it is the most 'descriptive' translation of 'Zeigen,' whereas 'showing,' in a sense, refers to the particular intention of pointing. Put differently: the point of 'pointing' is that it seeks to show something to someone, so in this regard showing is entailed in pointing. The other matter of translation that is important here concerns the word 'education' which I will use, when referring to Prange, as translation of the word 'Erziehung.' Prange is entirely clear that his arguments are about 'Erziehung,' not about 'Bildung' (see Prange 2012b, p. 111). For an exploration of the distinction between 'Erziehung' and 'Bildung' I refer the reader to Biesta 2020b).

An operational theory of education

In one sense, Prange's ambition is rather simple, as he just seeks to describe what it is that we *do* when we educate or teach⁴ (see Prange 2012a, p. 7). By starting with the question of the *form* of education or, with the term he tends to prefer, with the characteristic *operation(s)* of education, he seeks to develop a theory of education 'from the bottom up' (see *ibid.*), that is, from the point of view of the *practice* of education – or to be more precise: from the ways in which education is *enacted* – and not from the (normative) agendas ambitions that surround education.

An important reason for taking this route lies in Prange's concern for the integrity of education: both the integrity of education's practice and the integrity of its theory. Prange observes that in the public discourse about education other voices, such as those from psychology, sociology, economics, or organisational theory, have become much more prominent than the voice of education, which leaves education in the unenviable position of constantly having to translate insights from 'elsewhere' (see *ibid.*, p. 14). Prange emphasises that the issue here is not about the status of education as an academic discipline amongst other disciplines,⁵ and that it is also not a call for the splendid isolation of education (see Prange 2012a, p. 19), but that it is first and foremost about the terms of the relationship. Prange's main concern is to ensure that education doesn't end up as something entirely practical, devoid of any intellectual dimensions, and also not as something entirely instrumental – as just the 'executive arm' of agendas set elsewhere. And for this, so Prange argues, it is key that we are able to articulate what education in *itself* is, or, in a slightly more linguistic way, we need to be able to articulate what should count as education (in German: "eine Bestimmung dessen, was unter 'Erziehung zu verstehen ist" – *ibid.*, p. 19).

Prange develops his argument by means of what the most basic account of education, namely that education is about someone teaching something to someone. This already reveals that education consists of

⁴ In many case one could read what Prange writes about education as an account of teaching. Because I want to stay rather close to the German original – see also the previous footnote – I will in most case use the word 'education' rather than the word 'teaching.'

⁵ Whereas in the German context, and many other countries in continental Europe, education did establish itself as an academic disciplines, the main configuration of education in the English-speaking world seems to be that of an applied and in a sense 'practical' field of study; see Biesta (2011) for a reconstruction.

three ‘components,’ namely the one teaching (the teacher or educator), the one being taught (the student), and that what the teaching is about, which Prange refers to as the ‘theme’ (see *ibid.*, p. 37). The theme is that which is at stake in what the teacher seeks to teach to the student; it is that which is at stake in what the teacher hopes that the student will in some way acquire (or in less acquisitive terms: that which the teacher’s hopes towards the student are about). We can refer to this as ‘content’ but ‘theme’ allows for a wider and in a sense looser description of what is at stake. Prange gives several examples of possible themes, such as being able to walk, to speak, to read, to write and to do arithmetic (see *ibid.*, p. 42), thus suggesting that themes are relatively complex.⁶ He also uses the expression of ‘cultural meaning’ to explain what the status of themes in education is. Prange refers to the theme as that which the student is supposed to learn, and more generally connects education and teaching to learning. (I will return to this aspect of Prange’s argument below.)

While all education thus entails three components, it is not enough to just have a teacher who has the intention to make a particular theme available or accessible to a student. It only becomes education, so to speak, when the question of *how* to do this comes into play (see *ibid.*, p. 47), and this, so Prange argues, is the question of the *form* of education or, more precisely, the question of the particular *operation or operations* that establish a connection between the components so that the student can gain access to the ‘theme’ the teacher wishes to present to the student.⁷

So what, then, is the operation that establishes the connection between teacher, theme, and student and, in doing so, establishes the identity of the three ‘components’ as the one teaching, the one being taught, and the theme of the teaching? While Prange acknowledges that what is going on here can be described in many different ways and that, in a sense, there is quite a wide variety of educational operations, his central idea is that the basic gesture that can be found in all the different ways in

⁶ Prange’s examples are perhaps a bit odd, as one could argue that walking, for example, is not something for which one needs education, whereas reading, writing and arithmetic are more likely to be achievements that require education. Speech seems to be halfway, as it is not something that needs education, although speech can be improved by means of education.

⁷ I am aware that this formulation is a little vague, but this is because I do not want to confine what is going on in education to questions of the transmission of knowledge on the side of the teacher – which is why I think that ‘theme’ is a more interesting word – and also do not want to reduce the work of the student or that which the student may ‘gain’ from the teaching to matters of learning. I will return to this below.

which education can be enacted is that of pointing (see *ibid.*, p. 65). What is distinctive about pointing is its ‘double character’ (*ibid.*, p. 68), as the one pointing is not just pointing *at something* but is, in the act of pointing, referring *to someone*. The ‘Look there!’ of pointing always means ‘*You* look there!’, so we might say. One thing to highlight here is that the work of pointing always needs the hand and that, in this regards, education is literally a form of manual labour (in German: ‘Handwerk’ – see Prange 2012b). The other thing to highlight here is that pointing both *focuses* the attention and *asks for* attention or, in a slightly stronger formulation, *demands* attention (in German: “macht aufmerksam und fordert Aufmerksamkeit” – see Prange 2012a, p. 70).⁸ In this sense we could say that pointing is first and foremost an *evocative* gesture, and I wish to suggest that this gives pointing its educational significance.⁹

What makes the pointing educational is the fact that the educator hopes or expects that the student will do something with what the educator tries to focus the student’s attention on. ‘Hope’ and ‘expectation’ are the correct words here. This is first of all because the educator doesn’t produce the student’s attention, but rather acts on the assumption that the possibility to pay attention already exists, which means that pointing is a matter of (re)directing the student’s attention. But ‘hope’ and ‘expectation’ are also the correct words because at a very fundamental level the educator has no control over what the student will do once his or her attention is ‘caught.’ There is, in other words, no causal connection between the pointing and what may happen on the side of the student – which shows why ‘effectiveness’ is such an unhelpful notion in this context – although it doesn’t mean, of course, that the work of the educator is pointless.

⁸ Prange’s ideas here coincide with the way in which Benner has recently defined teaching as the art of *redirecting someone else’s gaze* (Benner formulates it in German as ‘die Kunst der Umlenkung des Blicks’; see Benner 2020, p. 21). For this, Benner refers the allegory of the cave in Plato’s *Republic* (for a detailed discussion see Benner 2020, pp. 15-23) where teaching is depicted as the ‘turning of the soul’s eye’ (Plato, 1941, p. 232). Benner, in his discussion of Plato, emphasizes that this redirecting is not caused by teaching and also cannot be enforced by teaching (see *ibid.*, p. 17), which means that, at most, it can be *evoked* by teaching. Whereas Benner approaches teaching in terms of the (re)direction of the student’s *gaze* and thus approaches teaching first and foremost in terms of *looking*, a slightly broader term that is useful here is that of *attention*, as one could argue that the basic gesture of teaching is that of trying to (re)direct the attention of the student to something (see also Rytzer 2017).

⁹ Prange and Strobel-Eisele (2006, chapter 2) suggest in their book on the forms of educational action that pointing is the basic educational form (in German: ‘Grundform’), and then distinguish between four forms of pointing: ostentatious (‘ostentativ’) pointing (which they connect to practicing); representative pointing (which they connect to presenting); evocative pointing (which they connect to summoning); and reactive pointing (which they connect to feedback).

With regard to all this, Prange makes two rather strong claims. One is that the work of the educator is aimed at the learning of the student. He highlights, however, that education doesn't produce the student's learning; this learning is simply there and can also occur without education. Yet what education aims for, according to Prange, is to influence and direct the student's learning, to put it in broad terms. The second claim Prange makes is that it is only because of its orientation on learning that pointing acquires its educational significance¹⁰ (see Prange 2012a, p. 67; see also Prange 2011). Before I add my comments, let me first reconstruct Prange's line of thought.

Education, teaching, and the invisibility of learning

As said, Prange argues for a very close connection between education and learning or, in more concrete terms, between teaching and learning. To make a case for a close connection is not to say that they are one and the same thing. On the contrary, Prange continuously emphasises the importance of the distinction between the two: that education and learning are two entirely separate processes and also separate operations, and that there is no automatic connection between the two. After all, people can learn and do learn without education. This so-called 'educational difference,' that is, the difference between (the operation of) teaching and (the operation of) learning is therefore a central idea in Prange's work. Yet key to education is to establish a connection between the work of the educator and the work of the student or, in the more general terms Prange uses, between education and learning. Prange even suggests at some point to use "education" (that is the word 'education' put in quotation marks) to refer to education and learning together, and use the word 'education' without quotation marks to refer to the work of the educator. Perhaps in English it makes sense to make a distinction between *educating* – as intentional action – and education – as the whole 'process,' but how important this is, remains to be seen.

While Prange thus gives learning a central position in his operational theory of education, he does so in a rather interesting and, so we

¹⁰ In German: "Allein durch den Bezug auf das Lernen gewinnt das Zeigen eine erzieherische Bedeutung." (Prange 2012a, p. 67)

might say, explicitly educational way. This has something to do with a fascinating claim he puts forward, namely that learning is basically *invisible* (see, e.g., Prange 2012a, p. 88); an idea he sometimes also refers to as the *intransparency* of learning (see, e.g. Prange 2012b, chapter 11).¹¹ Prange's point here is that learning doesn't show itself as some kind of isolated and self-sufficient thing or object we can simply study, like a tree, for example, but rather is entangled in all kind of situations and constellations through which we may have some kind of experience that learning *has* occurred (see Prange 2012a, p. 83). Learning thus constantly 'shows and hides' itself (see *ibid.*), which is the reason why Prange claims that 'learning is the unknown element in the educational equation' (*ibid.*, p. 82).

What, then, does the word 'learning' refer to? We assume, Prange writes, that learning has taken place when a child is able to do something that he or she wasn't able to do before (see *ibid.*, p. 104). Moreover, in education we assume that this *may* happen, and we find confirmation of this assumption when what we assumed *might* happen indeed did happen. But the 'event' of learning itself cannot be pinned down; the only thing we can observe is that something has changed – that a student is able to do something that he or she wasn't able to do at an earlier point in time. This also means for Prange that learning research is actually never researching learning *itself* but at most the relationship between 'trigger' and 'reaction' (in German: 'Reizinput und Reaktionsoutput' – see Prange 2012b, p. 173).

Rather, therefore, than trying to say something about learning in general or without context, Prange suggests that it makes more sense to say something about learning in its relation to education. And from this angle, Prange makes three claims about learning or, to be more precise, he formulates 'three fundamental insights about the meaning of learning for (educational) pointing' (Prange, 2012a, p. 87). The claims are: [1] that learning exists; [2] that learning is individual; and [3] that learning is invisible.

The claim that learning exists (my formulation; Prange writes 'Es gibt das Lernen.') means, for Prange, that learning is a reality in itself, independent from education. In a narrower sense Prange argues that

¹¹ For Prange this is also a reason for being highly critical of the idea that it is possible to conduct research on learning itself, and even more so of the idea that education should be based on the findings of such research (see Prange 2012b, pp. 172-173).

educators work on the assumption that learning exists – it is their operational premise ('Betriebsprämissen'). More widely Prange argues that learning is an 'anthropological constant,' a fact of human nature (see *ibid.*, p. 88). These claims still raise the question how we should understand learning, to which I will return. Yet one interesting implication Prange draws from this claim is that it doesn't make sense to suggest that we can learn how to learn, and that we should learn how to learn before learning can start (see *ibid.*, p. 88). Of course, we may learn how to study, or how to practice, or how to experiment, but learning itself, Prange argues, is not something that can be learned.

The claim that learning is individual, basically means that no one else can do my learning for me, just as no one else can eat for me or die for me (see Prange 2012a, p. 89). While Prange acknowledges that we can learn with others and from others, we still have to do our own learning so that, in this regard, we should be as careful with the phrase 'social learning' as we should be with the phrase 'learning to learn' (see *ibid.*).

The claim that learning is essentially invisible is related to the fact that learning is individual. Prange points out that with others we can only observe the potential 'effects' of learning but not the learning itself (see *ibid.*, p. 91). But also both with regard to our own learning and the learning of others we can only retrospectively, that is, after the 'event,' claim that learning has taken place. As Prange puts it: "Parents and teachers can see progress in what children are able to do, but cannot observe the learning itself." (*ibid.*, p. 91; my translation). While education *is* visible because it is a social act, learning is not, because it is a form of 'reception' by the individual, as Prange calls it, which is only visible in an indirect way (see *ibid.*, p. 92).

From an educational point of view, the question then is not whether we can say more about learning, albeit that Prange does venture into this terrain as well (see particularly Prange 2012a, pp. 93-106), but what we can say about the way in which the *co-ordination* between (the operation of) education and (the operation of) learning can be achieved or established (*ibid.*, p. 93). In the German literature this issue is known as the question of 'articulation,' a term introduced by Herbart. Prange discusses it as the question of the co-ordination of pointing and learning, and particularly the co-ordination of pointing and learning *over time* (see *ibid.*, chapter 5).

We have already seen, and this is also articulated in Prange's idea of the 'educational difference,' that teaching doesn't *cause* learning. Learning exists, as an anthropological fact or, if we don't want to overclaim, education proceeds on the assumption that students learn and can learn; that the learning is going on with or without education. Rather than to ask, therefore, what learning in itself 'is' in order then to use this knowledge in education – which for Prange is an impossible way of proceeding – Prange approaches the question by asking how learning becomes manifest as a result of education and, more specifically, as a result of or response to pointing. Seen in this way, Prange writes, "educating as pointing is a form through which learning is provoked" (see Prange 2012b, p. 169; my translation). The evocation entailed in the act of pointing – the 'You, look there!' – calls upon the student not just to look, not just to (re)direct his or her attention, but to do something with what is 'found' there.

In relation to this Prange makes the interesting suggestion that learning is brought to appearance ('Das Lernen wird zur Erscheinung gebracht' – *ibid.*, p. 171) *in function of* the way education is organised. In practicing, learning 'reveals' itself as imitation; in problem-solving it 'reveals' itself as innovation and invention; in projects it 'reveals' itself as practical learning, and so on (see *ibid.*). Prange therefore compares learning to a chameleon in that it takes up the 'colour' that suits the particular educational 'staging' (see *ibid.*). Prange keeps emphasising, however, that the learning 'itself' remains hidden. It only becomes 'partially transparent' in light of the educational provocations (see *ibid.*).

The final point Prange makes in this discussion is that the intransparency of learning should not be understood as a kind of 'darkness' that still needs to be brought to light (see Prange 2012b, p. 176), but has to do with the fact that the one who learns – I would prefer the word 'student' – in their response to what is being pointed out to them, respond in a reflexive way, that is, with reference to themselves, and not in a purely reactive or mechanistic way. In doing so, so Prange argues, they decide whether and how they want to learn (see *ibid.*). This has everything to do with the fact that human beings not only have an 'outside' of observable behaviour and action, but also an 'inside' of thoughts and feelings that is not observable from the outside, although in everyday interaction we try to 'read' the outside for clues of what's going on inside. In my own terms I would say that Prange's point here is that the student is never mere

object of educational interventions, but a subject to which things are being pointed out; a subject whose attention is being called for – but it is first and foremost *the subject's* attention, and not some kind of amorph or abstract process or mechanism.

The morality of pointing

The final aspect of Prange's work that I wish to discuss, concerns what he refers to as the moral dimension of education. Prange emphasises that for education there is not just the question of the standards that education should comply with; education also has a contribution to make to the morality of those being educated. In this regard, then, morality appears twice: as standard *for* and aim *of* education (see Prange 2012a, p. 137). Although education should live up to general ethical standards, just as any other field of human practice, the question is whether there are any *particular*, education-specific standards that educators need to take into consideration, similar to the particular ethics of medicine, for example.

Prange approaches this in terms of the question what makes education good, that is, when can we call educational action good. One option he discusses is to say that educational actions are good when they achieve what they intend to achieve (see *ibid.*, pp. 144-145). However, while this makes sense in the technical-mechanical domain – plumbing is good when it fixes the heating system; a car repair is good when it fixes a car – this line of argument does not apply to education. We know, after all, that even when educators have done everything right, there is no guarantee about the impact of their actions on the child or student, precisely because the relationship between educational action and what 'happens' on the side of the student is not mechanical but reflexive and self-referential. In other words: the student is subject, not object. And Prange also reminds us that there are cases where parents and teachers obviously didn't do the right things, and nonetheless their children and students turn out well.

Rather than focusing on the question of what education achieves – we might also say: what education produces – Prange suggests, not surprisingly, to turn to the question of the *form* of education, by

asking when (educational) pointing itself is good.¹² Or, to put it slightly differently, by asking what good (educational) pointing is. Prange thus seeks to articulate the morality of pointing itself (in German: ‘die Moral des Zeigens’) and comes up with three key requirements. One is that (educational) pointing needs to be understandable (‘verständlich’); the second is that it needs to be appropriate (‘zumutbar’); and the third is that it needs to be ‘connectable (‘anschlussfähig’).

With regard to the first requirement, Prange argues that whatever we point at, we must show it in such a way that it is correct, transparent, and comprehensible (see *ibid.*, p. 146). This entails the demand of rationality (see *ibid.*) or, phrased slightly differently, the demand of *truth* (*ibid.*, p. 148). Prange argues that this requirement holds both for what we point at, that is, for *what* we show, and for *how* we show it, where it is also important that we make the showing itself transparent and accessible.

With regard to the second requirement, that of ‘appropriateness,’ Prange argues that we must ensure that what we point at is accessible for the students we show it to, that it doesn’t go ‘over their heads.’ This doesn’t mean that it shouldn’t be challenging, but the challenge should be feasible. Prange suggests that this entails the demand of *respect*, that is, that we recognise our students as persons (his term) or subjects (my term), and do not approach them as objects, as that would turn education into training or oppression (see *ibid.*, p. 147).

Thirdly, ‘connectability’ is the requirement that students can do something with what we show them, and particularly that they can continue with what we present them in their own lives and on their own terms (see *ibid.*). It means, in other words, that in what we show we have the interests of our students in mind and need to find a connection to those interests, and not let our pointing be led by our own interests. This, so Prange argues, entails the demand of *freedom*.

It is important to highlight that on what Prange would see as a superficial reading, one could see the three requirements in purely technical terms, and think of them as requirements for effective instruction, irrespective of what the instruction seeks to bring about. To say that teaching should be comprehensible and feasible and, in a slightly narrow interpretation, should be useful for students, does indeed sound as if it is just a matter of

¹² I am adding ‘educational’ here in order to highlight that Prange’s discussion is not about the good of pointing in general, but about the good of pointing as an educational act.

making sure that the teaching ‘fits’ with the students, without specifying whether this is for indoctrination or emancipation. Prange emphasises, however, that the requirements are *not* morally neutral, which is precisely his suggestion that the requirements entail the demand of respect, truth and freedom. As he explains: any attempt at indoctrination would go against the demand for truth; any attempt at manipulation would go against the demand for freedom; and any attempt at social conditioning would go against the demand for respect (see *ibid.*, p. 150).

In this sense, then, Prange comes to the conclusion that the form of education – of educational pointing – has its *own* intrinsic or integral morality, rather than that this morality needs to be added to it from the outside. This, then, is another way in which the form of education matters for the integrity of education itself.

Discussion and conclusions

I started this paper with the observation that contemporary education is subject to many intentions and agendas. Some of these intentions are narrow and simplistic and reduce education to a commodity that is there to serve private interests, be they the interests of individuals, or of groups, or of society at large but only, then, in terms of producing commodities that are useful for the functioning of society (such as a well-educated labour force or a well-behaved or even obedient citizenry). There have been ongoing concerns about these developments; concerns that often refer to neo-liberal modes of governance and the centrality of economic agendas more generally. In all this, one key question is whether there is still an opportunity for education to exist as a common or public good, not focused on giving customers what they want from it, but contributing to a viable and vibrant public sphere which, in itself, is key for the democratic quality of society at large.

While these concerns are real and important, the intuition from which I have written this paper is that if we only focus on getting the agenda for education right and, more importantly, if we think that the push back against the ongoing privatisation of education is only a matter of establishing a progressive and democratic hegemony around the school, we continue to treat education itself – which first of all means the work of teachers – as an instrument for the delivery of such an agenda. While

agendas matter, and while the political struggle around the agendas for education remains important, my concern in this paper has been that the voice of education itself, so to speak, is easily lost or forgotten. As I have put it in the introduction, education ends up as a plaything or, to be more precise, it ends up as an object to be used, that is, as a commodity. In one and the same move it also turns educators into commodities, in things to be used, and the most visible manifestation of this is the ongoing attempt at seeing and treating teachers as technicians, that is, as deliverers of agendas from 'elsewhere.'

I have turned to Klaus Prange's work because I think that he is one of the few scholars who has tried to 'think' education from its *form*, and that he has done so precisely in order not to end up in the instrumentalisation and commodification of education by external agendas. So what does Prange's approach bring into view and how might this help in getting a sense of the integrity of education itself? If we follow Prange in his suggestion that pointing as the (re)directing of someone else's attention to something is the most basic and most proper educational gesture, then three questions can be asked. The first question is how we should understand this 'something.' *What*, in other words, is it that teaching should focus the student's attention on? The second question is *why* we should do this, that is, what the point of educational pointing actually is. And the third is *what students should do* once their attention has been redirected. What, in other words, do we expect from our students, or, in slightly more open terms, what do we hope that our students might do once we have managed to (re)direct their attention onto something? Let me try to answer these question with reference to Prange's ideas.

What is perhaps the most important and most interesting quality of the gesture of pointing, is that it is a double gesture, because in pointing we are always pointing at something – with the 'Look there!' we are directing someone's attention to *something* – yet at the very same time we are referring to *someone* – with the 'You, look there!' we are, after all, trying to direct *someone's* attention. With the double gesture of pointing we are therefore calling someone to attend to the world. It is not just that we make *the world* into an object for someone's attention; at the very same time and in one and the same gesture we are inviting *someone* to attend to the world. While we could say, therefore, that in pointing we focus the student's attention on the world, seen as everything 'outside' of the student, the act of pointing actually also points at the student and in

this way also brings the self of the student to the student's attention. This is not just beginning to reveal the way in which the gesture of pointing is truly *world-centred* (see also Biesta 2021). It also begins to reveal that world-centred education does not turn students *away* from themselves but rather calls for *them* to attend to the world. 'You, look there!'

Before I try to answer the question why we might do this, that is, how the act of pointing can be justified, I would like to say a few things about the third question: what it is that we expect from our students once we have managed to 'catch' their attention? From my own perspective I find it rather unhelpful that Prange focuses the answer to this question so strongly on learning. As I have argued in several places, learning is only one existential possibility amongst many others (see, for example, Biesta 2015b), so to claim, as Prange does, that the educational significance of pointing lies in learning, i.e., that learning gives pointing its educational significance, sounds too narrow to me, as it seeks to exclude many other ways in which human beings can exist in and with the world. In this regard I find Paul Komisar's suggestion to think of the student as an 'auditor' "*who is successfully becoming aware of the point of the act [of teaching]*" (Komisar 1968, p. 191; emphasis in original), far more interesting and relevant, as it allows for a much wider range of possible 'points' of the act of teaching than just learning, and thus opens up for a much wider range of responses on the side of the student than just learning (see, for more detail on this Biesta 2015b).

What I do find fascinating about Prange's discussion of learning, is first of all his idea of the intransparency and invisibility of learning, which is an effective antidote to all the claims about learning made by the learning sciences, including the claim that the science of learning should provide the basis for education. What is also very helpful is what we might term the profoundly *educational* account Prange gives of learning, that is, his suggestion that the ways in which learning emerges and shows itself is a function of particular educational provocations – the idea of learning as a chameleon. In all this, Prange maintains, correctly in my view, that learning itself actually never comes to the surface but that at most we can see change. This does mean, and there Prange's notion of learning remains rather formal and, in a sense, empty, that for Prange 'learning' basically refers to some kind of change and, in line with the most common 'formal' definition of learning, as change that is not the result of maturation. So perhaps it would have been more helpful if

Prange had replaced the word 'learning' with the word 'change,' although even then we might say that in education we are not just after change; sometimes the work we do as educators is to try to ensure that students *don't* change but stay on the 'narrow path,' so to speak.

This then brings me to the question of the *why* of pointing, that is, the question what the point of educational pointing actually is. What is very clear, is that *pointing is not about control*. One could say that this is the beauty of the gesture of pointing. It says 'Look there!,' and even says '*You*, look there!,' but it doesn't force the student to look there and doesn't determine what the student should do once he or she has focused his or her attention on what is 'there.' The gesture of pointing is, in this regard, not just an open gesture but also an *opening* gesture, as it 'opens' the world to the student and, as I have indicated above, in one and the same 'move' also 'opens' the student to the world. What is at stake in this gesture, therefore – as Prange indicates in his discussion of the morality of pointing – is the freedom of the student. This is not, so I wish to add, the freedom for the student to do what he or she wants to do, where the world is just an instrument or playground for the student's desires. It rather is the freedom to exist as subject 'in' and 'with' the world, not just pursuing one's own desires but also, and first and foremost, meeting the world and encountering what the world may be asking from us.

One thing to conclude from all this, is that in a rather profound sense the form of education-as-pointing already 'contains' a concern for the freedom of the student, and that this reveals something about the integrity of education because when this freedom is denied – when the difference between the operation of teaching and the operation of learning is forgotten or eradicated – education turns into something else, something profoundly uneducational. In this regard we might even say that the very form of education already resists any attempt to turn education into a 'perfect' instrument, which may even suggest – but I offer this for discussion – that education, if it stays true to its unique and proper form, may have an in-built resistance to attempts at its instrumentalisation and commodification. This, in turn, suggests that rather than only fighting for the right or proper agenda for education – which, in itself, is not unimportant – it is also absolutely crucial that we stand for the form of education itself, and not think of education's form as something contingent and practical, something that only has to

do with the ‘how’ of education – with how we teach – but that, in itself, would carry no significance.

The conclusion I wish to draw, therefore, is that the form of teaching matters, not in the technical sense in which teachers should be competent at teaching, but in the highly political sense in which the integrity of education is precisely to be found in the form of its enactment. While this insight may, in itself, not prevent neo-liberal incursions into the domain of education, I wish to suggest that a focus on form opens up a different terrain for resisting attempts at the instrumentalisation of education, and thus also opens up a different terrain for resisting the reduction of teaching to a technical matter and for resisting the reduction of teachers to mere technicians.

References

- Benner, D. (2020). *Umriss der allgemeinen Wissenschaftsdidaktik*. Weinheim: Beltz/Juventa.
- Ball, S. J. (1995). Intellectuals or technicians? The urgent role of theory in educational studies. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 43(3), 255-271. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3121983>
- Biesta, G. (2007). Why ‘what works’ won’t work. Evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit of educational research. *Educational Theory*, 57(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2006.00241.x>
- Biesta, G. (2011). Disciplines and theory in the academic study of education: A comparative analysis of the Anglo-American and continental construction of the field. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 19(2), 175-192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2011.582255>
- Biesta, G. (2013). Interrupting the politics of learning. *Power and Education*, 5(1), 4-15. <https://doi.org/10.2304/power.2013.5.1.4>
- Biesta, G. (2015a). What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement, and educational professionalism. *European Journal of Education* 50(1), 75-87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12109>
- Biesta, G. (2015b). Freeing teaching from learning: Opening up existential possibilities in educational relationships. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34(3), 229-243. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-014-9454-z>

- Biesta, G. (2020a). What constitutes the good of education? Reflections on the possibility of educational critique. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 52(10), 1023-1027. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1723468>
- Biesta, G. (2020b). Can the prevailing description of educational reality be considered complete? On the Parks-Eichmann paradox, spooky action at a distance, and a missing dimension in the theory of education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 18(8), 1011-1025. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210320910312>
- Biesta, G. (in press[a]). School-as-institution of school-as-instrument? How to overcome instrumentalism without giving up on democracy. *Educational Theory*.
- Biesta, G. (2021). *World-centred education: A view for the present*. New York/London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003098331>
- Biesta, G. (in press[b]). On being a teacher: How to respond to the global construction of teachers and their teaching? In M. Proyer, S. Krause & G. Kremsner (Eds). *Making of a Teacher in the Age of Migration*. London/New York: Bloomsbury.
- Herbart, J.-F. (1989). *Allgemeine Pädagogik aus dem Zweck der Erziehung abgeleitet*. In: Karl Kehrbach, Otto Flügel (Hrsg.): *Sämtliche Werke*. Band 2. Aalen: Scientia.
- Hodkinson, P. (1998). Technicism, teachers and teaching quality in vocational education and training. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 50(2), 193-208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636829800200045>
- Komisar, P. (1968). Teaching: Act and enterprise. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 6(2), 168-193. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00367718>
- Meirieu, P. (2007). *Pédagogie: Le devoir de résister*. Issy-les-Moulineaux: ESF Éditeur.
- Plato (1941). *The republic*. Oxford; Oxford University Press.
- Prange, K. & Strobel-Eisele, G. (2006). *Die Formen des pädagogischen Handelns. Eine Einführung*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Prange, K. (2011). *Zeigen, Lernen, Erziehen*. Herausgegeben von Karsten Kenklies. Jena: IKS Garamond.
- Prange, K. (2012a). *Die Zeigestruktur der Erziehung*. (2. Auflage. Korrigiert und erweitert.) Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh.
- Prange, K. (2012b). *Erziehung als Handwerk. Studien zur Zeigestruktur der Erziehung*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh. <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657775477>

Rytzler, J. (2017). *Teaching as attention formation. A relational approach to teaching and attention*. Doctoral Dissertation, Mälardalens Högskola.

Smeyers, P. & Depaepe, M. (Eds). (2006). *Educational research: Why 'what works' doesn't work*. Dordrecht: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-5308-5>

Contact address: Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy Faculty of Social Sciences. Maynooth University. Co Kildare, Ireland. E-mail: gert.biesta@mu.ie; gert.biesta@ed.ac.uk

