Togetherness – some introductory notes

Some years ago I read about a German experiment in the late 18th century. A group of well educated men were convinced that the language of all languages was German and to make the final proof they isolated a handful of babies from any type of lingual stimulation. No one spoke to them for years, the hypothesis being that the babies/children by themselves would at some point start to speak German. To the group of well-educated men it came as rather a surprise that none of the children started to talk German.

200 and some years later we know that there is no language of all languages. Whether it be certain categories, notions, languages – practices or logics – they are all social, that is, they are the result of a vast number of historical disparities, of historical struggles over what is right and what is wrong. And, by the same token, they all are produced and reproduced in and as part of social space[1]. So in Germany you learn to speak German, if not before then when you arrive in the educational system, because that is *the language of all languages* – in Germany.

In his short essay *Techniques of the Body,* Marcel Mauss describes how differences between the body techniques of English and French soldiers in World War II made it impossible for them to march together[2]. Ways of holding and handling the body also vary from place to place, from time to time.

When looking at *togetherness* we have to keep in mind that it is both a notion and a practice. It is both something we talk about and something we do. Or, to put it more precisely, it is something some of us have come to talk about and/or have come to practise, because we form part of the same field of education. In Denmark *togetherness* is at the same time a *language of all languages* and a *technique of the body*. It is a certain history materialized in things, thoughts and bodies. And because *togetherness* is simultaneously something we take for granted and a key part of the Danish educational system – explicitly and implicitly – we rarely take time to dwell upon what *togetherness* actually is. We do not consider why and how it is central to our educational system, who it benefits – everyone or only the (under-)privileged – and, finally, to what extent *togetherness* motivates and brings about more qualified pupils.

With the conference on *Togetherness as motivation – a 21st skill?* we get the opportunity to examine and discuss these questions. Not from one but from a variety of points – political, sociological, philosophical, psychological and practical. And not from only one national perspective but from and in close dialogue with international perspectives.

Togetherness – getting closer

Departing from these preliminary notes I will in what follows try to focus in on the notion of *togetherness*. Not to define it but to point out some of its characteristics. First of all, although

---

[1] Following Pierre Bourdieu, social space is a multidimensional space constructed on the principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question, i.e., capable of conferring strength, power within that universe, on their holder (Pierre Bourdieu: *The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups.* Theory and Society, Vol. 14, No. 6. (Nov., 1985), pp. 724).

[2] Marcel Mauss: *Techniques of the Body*. Economy and Society, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1973).

connected to it, *togetherness* is not to be confused with notions of community[3], communitas[4] or Gemeinschaft[5]. Why? Because *togetherness* is not a societal configuration. It is, rather, a mental configuration and an institutionalized practice in more or less dominant parts of a society. Thus a community can have but is not defined by whether or not *togetherness* is part of its logics and practices. However, turning to Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936), we might find a common denominator since his notion of *Gemeinschaft* holds a moral imperative: "[*Gemeinschaft* is]…founded on man conceived in his wholeness rather than in one or another of the roles"[6]. When we speak of *togetherness* in a Danish educational context, we tend to see it as a relational setting in which everyone participating can fully be themselves and to expect *togetherness* to help develop "the whole person". Especially at the level of elementary schools. To be able to work together and take part in classroom activities oriented toward group work or processes that involve partnership is central to understanding the role and practice of schools around the country. *Togetherness* is thus institutionalized as both a mean and a goal, as a way to learn the curriculum and a way to act – a way to be.

As such *togetherness* reflects a normative stand. It is something we believe in and a pedagogical practice we find pivotal to the development and education of our children. In a school context *togetherness* is explained as and thought of as a relation that is binding and carries obligations and commitment. This relation is one in which the individual is on the one hand accountable for the functioning and genesis of the classroom as a whole, and on the other through that participation acquires insight in the potential and the limitations of *togetherness*. In this way *togetherness* is seen as a way of contributing to the development of an independent individual. Only through these binding relations and through mutual responsibility between people in a certain social setting, in casu the school, can the individual develop into an independent, not to say, whole person.

But there is more to it than that. From sociological, psychological and pedagogical positions, it is argued that *togetherness* – being part of and taking part in specific and binding social activity – plays an important role in the motivation of children. Obviously there are a number of other factors – subject content/curriculum, the teacher, the class, the school, socio-economics, gender, ethnicity, locality – but the feeling of being needed and wanted, of ownership, of being in close contact together in working with a subject, all seem to carry an enormous weight as motivational tools.

Following French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), the close connection between *togetherness* and motivation can be said to have to do with the fact that human beings are fundamentally social beings and as such our primary driving force is to get recognition, especially from the people around us[7]. In every social setting we take part in, we struggle to position ourselves in ways that get the most recognition from those also involved in the same social

[3] Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgees & Duncan McKenzie: *The City*. Uniersity of Chicago Press (1925).
[4] Victor Turner: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Walter De Gruyter (1969)
[5] Ferdinand Tônnies: *Community and Society*. Harper and Row, New York (1963)
[6] Robert A. Nisbet: *Social Change and History – aspects of western theory of development*. Galaxy Books, London (1970:47)
[7] Pierre Bourdieu: *Practical* Reason. Stanford University Press (1998) and *Bachelors Ball*. Polity Press (2008). To name a few.

setting[8]. As social animals we are, to put it in another way, deeply dependent on others in order to fully prosper.

With this conference on *Togetherness as motivation* we want not only to understand the notion and practical implications of *togetherness* but also how *togetherness* works as a motivational force in educational settings. This is, of course, important to address and discuss solely because it concerns the education of our children. However, in a time where our culture places increasing emphasis on the individual, *togetherness* can also be of importance to the (democratic) understanding of others and to the ability of individuals to take part in society.

I very much look forward to the conference and to getting a more detailed and elaborate understanding of *togetherness as motivation*.

---

[8] To explain this Bourdieu introduces the notion of symbolic capital (among others, Pierre Bourdieu: *Language and Symbolic Power*. Polity Press (1996: 14-15)