

## FORGOTTEN VALUES AND DREAMS OF EDUCATION:

### AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPH WULF

**The interview was carried out in Brno on May 15, 2012, during a lecture visit at the Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, The Czech Republic. The interviewers were Klára Šedřová and Roman Švaříček.**

Klára Šedřová (KŠ): *When today most educational research concentrates on topics more or less connected with school effectiveness, it tries to find the determining factors and quantitative indicators of such effectiveness. However, you deal with something completely different. You study phenomena like emotions or rituals. So we would like to ask why you study rituals.*

Christoph Wulf (ChW): Effectiveness is a very complex term; it very much depends on the moment when you evaluate effectiveness. You can measure it right after the end of a program, but you can also evaluate it with methods of biographical research years later. After a few years, you can ask people what was important in their time at school. Some of them will come up with issues you would never think of. Today evaluation is often restricted to cognitive and measurable knowledge. But education has many other dimensions that are important. I am very interested in the aspects of education like emotions – those that are essential but difficult to measure, for example. It is very important not to reduce the complexity of growing up, of human development, of education to the effectiveness of teaching and testing subject matter.

On the basis of a democratic value system, we would argue that everybody has to be supported in learning as much as possible. But even students who are not doing well in

school have to be recognized as human beings. Recognition and consideration of extracurricular dimensions are needed. In school, social learning is essential. Almost all learning in school is social learning. Students study together with other students. That determines what and how they learn. There are basic human competences that we have to develop in school. If you focus only on school effectiveness in a narrow sense, you neglect very important dimensions of education. My own research deals with some of these dimensions that I think are endangered today by the fact that economic thinking and effectiveness thinking are so dominant and have such an influence on all areas of our lives. Even in private and intimate relationships, the economic and rational aspects play a central role and often make people forget that these aspects are not everything in life.

KŠ: *Can you tell us why rituals at school are so important?*

ChW: Rituals are very important in education. In the Berlin Ritual and Gesture Study<sup>1</sup>, we focused on the four important fields of socialization: family, school, youth culture, and media. It's obvious that rituals play a central role in all these fields of socialization. For several reasons rituals are essential in schools. First of all, they are social activities, collective activities. There would not be any social life if there were no rituals and ritualization. Second, in the process of transition, rituals help to transgress from one situation to another. The entrance ceremony in an elementary school is an example for such a rite de passage. When children are enrolled in school, it is very important that you mark this moment of transition through a ritual. Becoming a student in school means a profound change in children's lives. One of my doctoral students studied the first three months at our elementary school and related this period to the entrance ceremony. Much learning takes place in these three months. The just-enrolled students have to learn to sit down, to share the attention of the teacher with other children; they have to learn to concentrate on subject matters, to work in groups etc. Compared to the "Kindergarten," the school implies a profound change in their life. This is just one example. In families there are also many rituals related to meals, birthday parties, vacations etc. To read children a story in the evening to help them to fall asleep is also an important ritual, especially when they are afraid of falling asleep. Through this ritual they feel secure. They know that the same situation will be repeated the next day. That supports children in developing feelings of trust and security. Rituals help to establish social order and to make life reliable. When rituals are initiated, children often know what is going to happen and behave accordingly.

KŠ: *Is it possible to imagine schools without rituals?*

ChW: No, I don't think so. The school uses rituals to incorporate values, norms, attitudes, and social patterns of behavior in order to incorporate into the children ways and processes of learning that are important to the institution. Rituals and institutions are intertwined. In

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<sup>1</sup> The Berlin Study on Rituals is a study that lasted twelve years. The ethnographic research focuses upon the importance and meaning of rituals in educational processes, particularly in the learning of children. Empirically, the study's main focus is on the children of an inner-city elementary school and their families, where the research is confronted with the usual conditions prevalent in such inner-city schools: about 300 pupils from 15 different ethnic communities.

an institution, you have many rituals. The incorporation of the institution takes place through them. If you want to an educational reform, you have to change the rituals accordingly. It is no longer the teacher alone who decides about the learning process. He has to delegate parts of his responsibility for the learning process to the students. By organizing this kind of learning in rituals, students start to come to know this idea and to develop strategies of independent learning.

KŠ: *Does it mean that a good school develops some specific kinds of rituals?*

ChW: Yes, I think so. The school we worked with over the 12 years has no vandalism and no violence because teachers pay attention to these dimensions. In rituals, emotions are also regulated. You have a flow of emotions in a ritual that creates a feeling of belonging to each other. This is extremely important for the identification of the children with their learning tasks and with their school. According to the experiences in this school, it is very important to pay attention to the ritual dimension of learning. Rituals are not necessarily conservative. Often children and adolescents develop rituals of rebellion that are important for the development of their identity.

In the field of sustainable development, demonstrations concerning ecological or peace issues are rituals used for very innovative purposes. I will give you an example. In the early 90s in Germany, we had quite a few cases of violence against foreigners and people with an immigration background. One day hundreds of thousands of people in Berlin and in other cities lit candles and put them in front of their windows to demonstrate that we don't want human beings persecuted in our society. This was a very powerful, newly invented ritual for which there was no preceding model. It was the invention of a ritual that was impressive because it was a mise-en-scène of the values of democracy, of civil society in which we live together with people being different. In this context rituals are progressive and develop new ways of communication.

RŠ: *You mentioned that a good school has to have some rituals. What are the characteristics of a good school?*

ChW: A good school does not only focus on subject matter-oriented learning, but also realizes other dimensions of human development. It is one thing to focus on subjects like

Czech, English, or mathematics. It is another thing to learn how to learn, e.g. students have to learn how to organize their own learning process. Much of what students learn in schools will be outdated after a few years or after a few decades. They have to learn new content. For this reason students need to develop the ability to learn how to learn. I think a good school also has to focus on democratic behavior and participation. These values are extremely important in education. To reduce school education to content and cognitive issues and to testing and measurement is not acceptable. Many teachers complain about such a tendency. They feel that what they are after in their work is not adequately appreciated by the school administration.

One of the important goals of educational reform in Germany is directed towards *inclusive education* to improve the support for students with learning disabilities. Some of them are handicapped; others have an immigration background that restricts their learning opportunities. We need more effort in this field. It is very important that teachers are encouraged to be aware that their educational responsibility is more comprehensive than just focusing on subject-oriented learning. A good school tries to combine subject matter-centered learning with social learning and learning within programs of inclusive education.

RS: *You mentioned that you are doing something different from the mainstream in education, testing, PISA, high-stake tests, and things like this. When you recall how you developed these concepts of ritual, body, gestures, and non-verbal communication in the 90s, was it difficult to establish these concepts in the scientific community?*

ChW: Not really. When we published our first book, *The Return of the Body*<sup>2</sup>, with a prestigious publishing company, some of our colleagues were a bit irritated. A few years later, the body became one of the central paradigms in the humanities. Later we worked on the anthropology of the senses. The development of sensuality is an important topic in education too. What is the relationship between the senses, between the predominant visual and the acoustic sense? What is the role of the senses like touch, taste, and smell in human

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<sup>2</sup>Dietmar Kamper, Christoph Wulf (eds.). *Die Wiederkehr des Körpers*. Frankfurt/a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982 (several editions).

development? In my view the development of sensuality is essential in education. We never presented their results in an aggressive way. I pursued my research and offered the results to the public that accepted the importance of these perspectives in education. Some of my work received considerable attention. I continued my research; I had my views, beliefs, and perspectives; I limited my work to present insights, but never turned them into a mission and tried to persuade people. These studies therefore were very well accepted.

In the 70s during the cold war, I was very much involved in peace education. I developed *critical peace education* in Germany and founded the Education Commission of the International Peace Research Association. In my view, issues of violence and of handling violence are very important in education. They challenge human beings and have to be dealt with in education. Educational and Human development is our task at school. In German we call this *Bildung*. Children have to learn to work, to cooperate, to do things, and to accept who they are. It is crucial that children also learn to accept the way they are. In education we often work with negative feelings; we devalue children who are not successful. I think this is wrong. Not only the good students but every student has the right to be supported.

KŠ: *In one of your texts, you write about various educational theories or concepts – for example, those of Comenius, Rousseau, Humboldt, and so on – and about dreams. Do you think that scientists dream?*

ChW: In this text I argue that in the modern era, education became a utopian idea; it became crucial to making human beings as perfect as possible. Comenius's conviction to teach everybody everything in a reasonable way expresses this dream best. I think education needs a utopian element; but this goal does not allow the exclusion of people who are not able to integrate themselves in this dream. Comenius's idea of teaching everybody everything in a reasonable way is very present in UNESCO. Education for All (EFA), UNESCO's most comprehensive educational program, is based on the goal of reducing the number of children who cannot read and write. The millennium's goals are to establish literacy worldwide in order to make all children participate in the realm of literate culture. As important as some utopian thinking in human development is, we have to avoid reducing education to one single concept of education. Neill's concept of antiauthoritarian education is an example of such reductionism of educational thinking. Due to its complexity, education has to take inputs from different concepts and perspectives and cannot limit itself

to one single concept of education or to an educational utopia. In most utopian dreams, there is at least one important element that is focused on. To reduce the complexity of education to it is a mistake.

RŠ: *What about the role of theories in education?*

ChW: There are at least three types of theories. The first type includes general theories, for example, theories about the relationship between education and anthropology or between education and society. The second type embraces “smaller” theories, such as less comprehensive theories related to educational values, goals, and methods, or theories that guide research, such as ones on how you improve independent or inquiry learning. The third type of theory relates to practical knowledge of which often teachers are not aware. Most of what happens in daily school life is based on practical knowledge that is an implicit knowledge. To work with teachers on their experience-based embodied knowledge is crucial. Some years ago I was in charge of an in-service workshop for teachers. In this group there were teachers from all types of schools. Over several weekends we met and talked about issues the teachers brought up. We discussed issues close to their practical work as teachers. Each time I wrote a very detailed protocol of our discussion. According to the teachers, this type of in-service training that focused on embodied theories of education was very helpful. In my view educational science has to provide comprehensive knowledge of the educational practice and is needed for a better understanding and for an improvement of educational practice, like medicine or law. I also have colleagues who do research on educational practice, but don’t care about its improvement. They stick to a quantitative research method that they claim to be the only scientific one. I don’t think this is true. In my view we need to consider the wide range of the goals and research proceedings. I don’t share the assumption that in the humanities one single method guarantees the scientific character of research. It needs additional criteria. When you have a reduced understanding of scientific research, then everything is much easier. Then you don’t have all the problems related to practice and implicit knowledge that are so difficult to deal with in research.

RŠ: *You mentioned that we have forgotten that education should be broader and more colorful. But why is the mainstream conception of education so narrow nowadays? The concept of the scientific measurement of*

*cognitive outcomes finds much attention. Do you think this has spread all over the world because we don't have clear goals and visions or even dreams?*

ChW: It seems to me that there is a coalition between this quantitative measurement and research and politics. Politicians refer to this kind of knowledge and insist that this type of quantitative research tells them *what kind of learning takes place in the schools*. There's no doubt that this type of research is needed. But politicians and the general public also need to be aware of its limitations. To enlarge the realm of knowledge, we also need comprehensive qualitative research that provides us with knowledge on individual students in educational situations, their learning, and their personality development. Students are very different, and it is the teacher's task to deal with these differences adequately. A good teacher has to develop procedures that support the learning process for very different students. The diversity of students limits the value of universal knowledge for the improvement of teaching and learning. We therefore need a great variety of research, not just one type. Different research findings increase the complexity of knowledge, but make it more difficult or even impossible to compare its results. If you stick to quantitative research, the comparison is much easier. Finally you compare the effects of education according to some abstract criteria; you compare figures with each other and explain their representational value. Even in this case you have cultural biases in the comparisons.

Generally speaking, the PISA countries with students that had experience in testing achieved better results. At the beginning of the testing, in German schools many students did not care about these tests. They had no experience with tests and very little interest in succeeding. Now this has changed; students became familiar with the "game of testing" in the sense of Wittgenstein's language game. Due to language skills and corresponding cultural backgrounds, the English-speaking students were better represented in these tests than others. Likewise, many Asian countries like Korea succeeded well in these tests. If you know Korean schools, you also know why this is the case. In these schools much closely supervised and guided learning takes place that makes students learn by heart. I would argue that conceptualizing education that way often may reduce student's creativity.

Students have to learn to learn. They have to try to find new solutions. This implies, of course, that children are allowed to make mistakes in searching for new solutions for



problems they are confronted with in their learning process. Mistakes can be very productive in the process of learning. If you try something new, you cannot avoid making mistakes. We should encourage students to take risks; only then they will develop creative thinking.

Today too much research in education focuses on quality control. I think it is more important to create quality than to control it. In my view, we need complexity e.g., variety and difference in education. When you accept this view, the quality of education is much more difficult to control. I am in favor of allowing space and time to students to develop their way of learning and their way of controlling the learning process. Well-trained teachers can combine the stimulation of creative learning with inbuilt ways of control. It does not have to be control by tests or by other forms of measurements.

In my perspective, it is important that children enjoy learning and that they like to be in school. It makes no sense to make children compete with each other. Children have to learn to accept themselves as they are; they also have to see how they can create the conditions for a fulfilled and happy life. Sometimes it is very important to be critical of economic and social pressure spread over all areas of human life. In my view a critique of the society we live in is part of a reflexive democratic education. This also implies a critique of capitalism and neoliberalism. Education has to contribute to making children fit for the future. The challenging issues of the future will be related to *peace and violence*, to peace also in the sense of social justice. They will be related to the tensions between homogenization and *cultural diversity* in the process of globalization. They will be linked to *sustainable development* being a challenge to the society of consumption. We have to rethink our existence due to the fact that resources are limited. Education has to confront children and adults with peace, diversity, and sustainability issues.

RŠ: *You mention cultural diversity in a globalized world. But where do you see the specifics of European education compared to the rest of the world or nations like Korea?*

ChW: First of all, we have to accept that Europe no longer serves as a model for the world. In the area of economics, democratic values, and procedure, but also lifestyle, Europe still is very influential. Education in Europe is an *intercultural task*. On the one hand, we have Czechs, Slovaks, French, and Germans with their particular cultural backgrounds and identities. On the other hand, we have common values related to wellbeing and democracy

that are important to life in Europe. It seems to me that we have to learn to cooperate with others; sometimes this is not easy. Europe has had three major strategies to reduce the perception of the *other*: first, *logocentrism*, that is, our form of rationality; second, *egocentrism*, that is, our form of individualism; and, third, *ethnocentrism*, that is, our form of ethnocentric behavior. In the colonial period, these strategies were used to devalue other human beings and to reduce them to nonhuman beings – to “animals.” When they were reduced to “animals,” they were used as slaves. Six million Africans were transported to Brazil as slaves, and only 3 million arrived; the others died on the passage to South America. In our culture there is much violence, of which we have to be aware to avoid its bursting out. If we are not conscious of the violence in our societal structures, it can easily surprise us.

*RŠ: I think it's time for our last question. You are here because you are giving lectures to our students. What would be your advice to young Czech students or researchers?*

ChW: I am always careful about giving advice. I am delighted to develop my views in lectures and talks with you and your students, but I hesitate to take the role of an advisor. If you insist on asking me what I consider to be central values and aims of university teaching, I am happy to mention a few aspects. One of my goals in teaching at the university is to support students in becoming *creative*. First, you have to show them yourself what it means to be creative. In this process it's important to communicate curiosity and passion to students. You have to be able to be astonished, to wonder, to ask questions, and to think to conceptualize problems and methods to solve them by reflection and further research. It is crucial to offer students the sharing of brainstorming processes and the experience that there is a profound pleasure in discovering new insights. It's our task to support students in becoming independent and reflexive young intellectuals who are passionate in their thinking and research. Education is a very important endeavor. It is essential to make students, teachers, and parents aware of the complexity of education and to prevent them from reducing it too superficially.

Apart from these points, I would like to mention the importance of mimetic, ritual, and gestural processes in education. Cultural learning is largely mimetic learning, which needs to be considered much more in research and teacher training. Mimetic learning means creative imitation. For this purpose it needs other human beings, social relationships with them, and

cultural goods to incorporate. It also needs to develop the competence of imagination and of transcultural communication. To stimulate complex ways of learning, we need anthropological research, including its historical and transcultural dimension.

KŠ, RŠ: *Thank you very much for the interview.*

### **About Christoph Wulf**

CHRISTOPH WULF is a professor of anthropology and education and co-founder of the Interdisciplinary Center for Historical Anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin. He is a member of the International Research Training Group “InterArt,” the Collaborative Research Center “Performing Cultures,” and the Cluster of Excellence “Languages of Emotion” at the Freie Universität Berlin. He is executive editor of “Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie” and co-editor of the “Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft” (Journal for Educational Science) as well as a cooperative member of several international journals. He focuses on research into historical and educational anthropology, mimesis, aesthetics, intercultural education, performativity, and ritual research. Since the 1970s he has published a large number of articles and books, such as *Die Wiederkehr des Körpers* (1982, with Dietmar Kamper), *Mimesis. Culture – Art – Society* (1996, with Gebauer, G.), *Mimesis, Poiesis, Performativity in Education* (2007 with S. Suzuki), (2010, et al.) *Ritual and Identity*; (2013) *Anthropology. A continental perspective*.

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