

The Delta Kappa Gamma Society International promotes professional and personal growth of women educators and excellence in education.

## 1 Introduction

Dear conference guests and participants - I am honoured to be asked to follow the excellent presentation of María Einarsdóttir – and present my reflections – now inspired by hindsight.

## 2 My task is to talk about

Changing perspectives on education in the course of an academic career – my career

Therefore, the question I am really responding to is this: What has changed in my mind when I now think about education?

My first short response is that practically everything has changed in my mind looking back at my professional life – and I find it more testing than I expected to respond to the task given to me – both because I had to make a very difficult selection of issues – and to realise how much my values with respect to education have changed.

I started teaching physics, cognitive science, learning theory and research methods at the University of Iceland having returned from studies in the UK. I obtained a post in education, with special emphasis on educational psychology and since then I have taught a number of different courses, served in administration and directed my research interests in many different directions. But in the last decade I have focused on how education is responding – or not –to the challenges of the future.

I decided to select four issues I now feel education should place as its top priorities.

### 1. First I suggest that we should involve our students significantly in the conduct of education, much more than we do now

Education has its focus on young people, helping them to develop and prepare for mastering an increasingly complex world. It makes eminent sense for an enterprise, like ours – to involve these central players in a thoroughly significant way. Therefore, I make this the first issue to address and on this score I would like to see quite substantial developments. But we may ask:

First: Do the young people often have better understanding and solutions to the current or future tricky problems than we have? No, they are sometimes less knowledgeable, less motivated and less mature. But often they are indeed truly knowledgeable, motivated and ingenious and may present important new perspectives. We may also note that– we, the grown ups– are often surprisingly ignorant about what is happening in our world.

Second: Do we want them to accept more responsibility? Yes and no – perhaps to a certain extent – but we need to be very careful that we are not rescinding the responsibility society takes for the young.

Thus, we have to discuss very carefully, why we should involve the young people at a very different level from what we are accustomed. We need to develop the ethical, democratic but not least the pragmatic reasons for doing so - and the ways to do it.

2. **Second I insist that “thinking about education” should always be in focus – especially when addressing the future**

In recent years, I have focussed on the future, on how so many things are developing very fast, practically wherever we look and how education should or might take account of these changes. Yes, and education certainly moves but quite slowly. This is because the changes are complex, we don't know how education should respond to them, e.g. how to teach critical thinking or the other of the 6Cs -- and there are, also, a number of well-intentioned vested interests that don't want much change. I think, however, the single most important reason why we find it difficult to move more dynamically is the lack of discussion about the nature and role of education.

We neglect to stop and think about what is the essence of education. All other issues can only make sense if we are clear about where we want to go and why – which we rarely are. What I find particularly interesting when adopting this perspective, - focussing on the present but even more on the future - is that old and new –good ideas about education become equally significant. It is relevant to seek advice from Socrates and Plato, Aristoteles, Rousseau, or John Dewey, Ellen Key, Maria Montessori, or Hannah Arendt or Martha Nussbaum – and many more who have presented provoking ideas.

We need new knowledge about where the world is heading, new understanding about our social conditions and technology and how our brain works, - but we also need profound timeless thinking – which is probably what is most important when discussing education – and we tend to forget to engage in this.

3. **Thirdly I want to direct our focus towards professional development and professional education, far more pointedly than we are doing now**

It fits particularly well with the theme of a conference, on „professional research and practices“, to note that our future demands a dramatic re-focussing on the role of professional education and professional development. Many people realise this but I feel many underestimate its urgency.

The content of education has moved in relatively short time from the 3Rs, adding a variety of subjects and a host of new skills, such as the 6Cs and the skills continue to develop and new subjects emerge and the old ones change. The social and cultural conditions surrounding education change, perhaps more than we notice – and these changes will only speed up. This puts enormous pressure on education and in particular on the professionals involved.

Thus, the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be characterised by placing professional development and continuing education of teachers increasingly within the schools themselves, but

notably with an infrastructure – in some ways similar and definitely equally important to the one we have for pre-service education– new ideas must constantly find their way into schools and be allowed to develop there. Probably the most viable idea in this connection is that of the learning community, within schools –developed inter alia by professor Anna Kristín Sigurðardóttir, who is presenting on Friday. In addition, quite fittingly, to my mind, the conference theme is spot on, as reflected in the title of many presentations and the opening keynote.

#### 4. Fourthly I think education needs to be thought of as a cultural venture

I want to follow Martha Nussbaum as she develops the idea of **cultivating imagination**. I now see education primarily as a cultural rather than a technical undertaking, and such a perspective changes quite dramatically how we talk about and conduct education. This is a complicated story that needs to be developed but to my mind an exceptionally important one.

#### 5. Conclusion

I think it is exciting that education constantly faces a host of challenges, which is perhaps the main reason I find it difficult to leave the field. Most of these deserve exploration, but to conclude I will attempt to rephrase and clarify the four I mentioned and I think need to be set as absolute priorities:

- 1) One is that we should ensure that the discussion about the **nature and role** of education becomes the focus of the educational discourse.
- 2) Next, that we should move the discussion about education from being a technical or organizational matter to respecting it as a genuinely **cultural** enterprise, acknowledging all the complications that this entails.
- 3) Three, that we should ensure that the education of professionals within the field of education is equally balanced between pre-service preparatory education and a long-lasting intensive **professional education and development**.
- 4) Four, for the sake of emphasis, I will end with the point I mentioned first - and I am under the influence of your first keynote speaker, Kolbrún, on this point. We should make a massive effort to **truly involve the young people**, - in our conduct of education -, which indeed is all about them and their environment – and we should do this for the ethical, democratic and pragmatic reasons I noted. I applaud the organizers of the conference for making a symbolic and a substantive statement on this issue by the way of organization, and the inspired presentation by María obviously justifies their plan.

Thank you