This article attempts to unpack the possible implications for educational practice of the «aporetic ethics» of Derrida (Zlomislic, 2007), complemented and amplified by Nietzsche’s notion of intellectual conscience. Since teaching practice is typically characterised by choices between conflicting values, ethics in teachers’ work entails sensitivity to the complex and dilemma-loaded reality of practice. If choices of action are predetermined by a «program» to be implemented, ethical awareness is dimmed or eroded. Present neoliberal educational policies may contribute to such erosions of the conditions of possibility of ethical action in educational practice.

Keywords: aporia · intellectual conscience · dilemmas of schooling

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This article attempts to unpack the possible implications for educational practice of the «aporetic ethics» of Derrida (Zlomislic, 2007), complemented and amplified by Nietzsche’s notion of intellectual conscience. The question of the relation between Derrida’s deconstructivist philosophy and ethics is complex and has been the subject of much debate (Howells, 1999; Zlomislic, 2007), which cannot be recounted here. My own view is that Derrida is primarily concerned with the conditions of possibility of ethical action, which is not the same as propagating general ethical principles. On the other hand, it may also be said that this concern for the conditions of possibility of ethics is itself ethical. Since these conditions have a lot to do with aporia (see below), Derrida’s ethical thinking can be called «aporetic».

Derrida’s point seems to be, that without a clear view of these conditions we may unintentionally create social structures and practices, which erode the very conditions for ethical action and hence erode ethics itself. Perhaps Howells is right in calling Derrida’s philosophy an «Ethics of Ethics» (Howells, 1999, p. 126). Zlomislic, on the other hand, contends that Derrida does indeed have an ethics, because he is «committed to certain epistemic values» (2007, p. 9; italics here). These val-
ues include honesty and humility about our knowledge and our language, and they arise out of the recognition that knowledge and language are basically open, containing infinite possibilities of interpretation. As Zlomislic (2007) points out, this idea belongs originally to the Jewish tradition, which Derrida shares with Levinas.

This article presents a point of view that is «postmodern» in the sense that the contingent, uncertain, ambiguous and non-foundational character of all ethical action is emphasised, as opposed to the rationalistic, deductivist and monological approach characteristic of modernism in general (cf. Dunne, 1993). In education, the latter approach has during recent decades gained a new impetus by the spread of neoliberal educational policies; implemented as what critical voices have called for instance «professional managerialism» (Woods & Jeffrey, 1996) or «scientific management» (Neyland, 2010).

The article begins with an account of the ethical import of Derrida’s philosophy, which is then compared to and complemented with Nietzsche’s ethical thinking. The «aporetic» and «agonistic» traits of Derrida and Nietzsche are then related to the dilemmatic character of teachers’ work, as first described by Berlak and Berlak (1981). Following Derrida, the conditions of teachers’ work seem especially conducive to ethical action; aporia («no ways out») and dilemmas being rather similar in nature. Finally, I argue that the market oriented, neo-liberal educational policies with outcome-based curriculums threaten to turn teachers into mere «curriculum managers» and deliverers of pre-specified programs. These changes of the conditions of teachers’ work may erode the very conditions of possibility of ethical pedagogical action.

Derrida and the origin of ethics

I will start by reflecting on the quote below, taken from The other heading: memories, responses, and responsibilities (Derrida, 1992). This text is not particularly focused on ethics in or of education, but educational issues are nevertheless touched upon in passing. At one point, Derrida says:

I will even venture to say that ethics, politics, and responsibility, if there are any, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia. When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make: irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program. Perhaps, and this would be the objection, one never escapes the program. In that case, one must acknowledge this and stop talking with authority about moral and political responsibility. The condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia from which one may invent the only possible intervention, the impossible invention. (Derrida, 1992, p. 41; italics in original)

Let us look closer at what is being said here. «I will even venture to say that ethics, politics, and responsibility, if there are any…» The last words, even without emphasis, are a bit disturbing. They suggest that ethics, politics and responsibility perhaps do not exist at all, at least not in any genuine sense. What we call ethics is then not worthy of the name. Derrida seems to imply that ethics, politics and responsibility are rare things. Why? Because they «will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia.» Aporia (plural for Greek aporos) literally means situations in which there are no ways out, no exits. Derrida uses the word in the
sense of not knowing where to go (Derrida, 1993). To actively bear or endure aporia is according to him the very condition of decision and responsibility (Derrida, 1993, p. 16). This is an expression of his general and strong refusal to accept easy technical or grammatical solutions to ethical issues.

Thus, the origin of genuine ethics is, Derrida seems to say, the experience (to begin with) of situations with no solution. It could be situations where there is a clash or contradiction between different values, where there is no possibility of «doing the right thing» without also doing something not right, hence seeing no way out. Ethics arises when in a given situation we experience the demand of two (or more) values, and when we see that the realisation of one denies or excludes that of the other(s). Still we have to act, and that is where the «experiment» comes in. If our experience of the aporia is deep and strong, we are likely to feel frustrated, because one (or more) of the values had to be sacrificed. Nevertheless we are responsible for our choice, and we know it.

All this is very different from «When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make…» When the line of action and its different procedures are given and specified for every possible situation, «irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program.» Authoritative and «certain» knowledge and/or planning have already made the decisions «in advance.» We are no longer responsible, but we act in good conscience. «Good conscience» is ironical, of course, since in this situation genuine conscience is irrelevant. We feel good simply because we are obedient to the program. We may also feel good because we are «capable» and «efficient.» However, our actions are no longer ethical.

«Perhaps, and this would be the objection, one never escapes the program.» The role of the teacher is to a great extent predefined by socially or culturally established norms, as well as rules and regulations. On top of that, we all have our own idiosyncratic «programs» implanted in us: in certain situations we are conditioned to act in certain ways (Ornstein, 1991). But if we cannot ever escape from acting according to a program in one sense or another, we must «stop talking with authority about moral and political responsibility», as well as about ethics. (Perhaps, however, we can still talk about it without authority?) Skinner’s (1988) Beyond freedom and dignity comes to mind: from a strictly scientific point of view responsibility does not exist; there are only conditioned behavioural patterns «programs» encoded in the brain).

«The condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible…» The question here is: how can responsibility, and therefore ethics, exist? What makes it possible? Again, the answer is the experience and experiment of the aporia, of the «possibility of the impossible.» We are back at the situation of the conflicting and contradictory demands of different values, but a further nuance is added: the feeling or intuition that perhaps it is possible to find a way out. This feeling becomes a guide to action, «the testing of the aporia from which one may invent the only possible intervention, the impossible invention.» From probing and experimenting one may one day come upon an «impossible invention».

Again strong words, even without italics. One wonders if Derrida is anxious to point out that these are not common, everyday experiences and experiments. «Impossible inventions» do not happen without the agonising experience of the aporia, taking the conflict of values seriously, not escaping or
avoiding the pressure of the impossibility of the situation. The older we are the cleverer «defence mechanisms» we may have developed for avoiding painful experiences of this kind. «Experience» tells us that certain things are simply not possible or «realistic» and therefore not worth bothering about. In time we may learn not to see the conflict of values that characterise our professional practices in general, and educational practice in particular.

It may be argued that standing in the midst of aporia rather makes one unable to act, that it freezes our initiative and spontaneity to the point of indecision. Derrida, however, rejects this idea in his usual dialectical manner by making indecision, or the undecidable, «the very condition of any decision» (Derrida; in Hill, 2007, p. 111). Without the undecidable, the hesitation between alternatives, there is no decision to be made. When the moment of decision arrives it is not as a result of logical deduction, it is beyond rational deliberations. Therefore Derrida agrees with Kierkegaard: «the instant of decision is madness» (in Zlomislic, 2007, p. 252). And it is actually in this moment of madness that «I» am constituted as a responsible subject. The subject does not first exist and then «take on» a particular responsibility; on the contrary, it is itself an «effect», an outcome of the aporia, of the indecision and the moment of madness that resolves it. Howells contends that it is this understanding «of the subject as effect that lies at the root of Derrida's aporetic conception of ethics» (Howells, 1999, p. 135).

Madness, however, is frightening. It is therefore much easier – for one’s «peace of mind» or «good conscience» – to compromise one's responsibility by following ethical rules and regulations. Hence Derrida also agrees with Kierkegaard’s notion of «the temptation of the ethical». This is the temptation to explain and justify one’s decision in general terms, on the basis of universal or generalisable ethical principles. For Derrida, this means to escape from the aporia and from one’s own singular responsibility (cf. Pirovolakis, 2010, p. 141).

The condition of indecision does not even disappear after the decision has been made; it continues to haunt us through sleepless nights or in other more or less troubling ways. Therefore, to endure the aporia of any professional practice is to be aware of the non-closure of the significance of one’s actions and choices. There is no such thing as «I did the right thing».

Derrida even relates the condition of undecidability to desire and love:

[If] I knew and could decide in advance that the other is indeed the identifiable other who is accessible to the movement of my desire, if there weren’t always the risk that the other might be somewhere else, that I might have made a mistake, that my desire might not reach its destination, that the movement of love that I intend for the other might get lost en route or meet with no response, if there weren’t this risk, marked with undecidability, then, there would be no desire. (in Hill, 2007, p. 111)

Teachers have their own kind of wishes and desires, not least for their students, which is continually in danger of getting lost en route or meet with no response. There is a certain pedagogical love between the teacher and her students (Gidley, 2009). Creativity and spontaneity also reside in the desire that connects teachers emotionally to their work:

Such desires among particularly creative teachers are for fulfilment, intense achievement, senses of breakthrough, closeness to fellow humans, even love for them /.../ Without desire, teaching becomes arid and empty. It loses its meaning. (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 22)
This desire and love is not the condition of the *aporia* of many pedagogical situations, it is rather the opposite: the undecidability is the condition *sine qua non* of love and desire, Derrida maintains. In the quote from Derrida above it is also evident that the absolute alterity of the other, her resistance to all kinds of appropriation and subordination to the self, is the point of origin of his ethical thinking. «Absolute alterity constitutes the positive condition of a genuine relation to the other, of an authentic responsibility for and to the other» (Pirovolakis, 2010, p. 139).

How can a teacher «live» this idea? Or perhaps it is not a question of «how», but simply of the presence or absence of conditions of possibility for genuine responsibility. However, the teacher’s relation to the pupil or student as precisely pupil or student reduces the latter’s absolute alterity; (s)he is predefined by the social category of «student» and as such subordinated to the teacher’s self. From this point of view, there is no such thing as «teacher’s ethics» or «pedagogical ethics», except as technical reductions of the original and authentic ethical relation.

**Derrida and Nietzsche**

When comparing two philosophical thinkers, one is almost bound to find both differences and similarities. Nietzsche being as it were a post-structuralist *avant la lettre*, it is not too surprising to find in his thought some points of agreement with Derrida. However, whereas for Derrida responsibility for the other is of central importance, Nietzsche rejects responsibility as a basic ethical principle because of its connections to sin, guilt and punishment. He celebrates instead the playfulness of being irresponsible. Nietzsche’s ethics is an ethics of self-realization in which «the other» is of secondary importance, whereas for Derrida, responsibility and the alterity and singularity of the other are primary concerns (Zlomislic, 2007). Yet, in spite of such a basic and important difference, there are many parallels and affinities between Derrida’s and Nietzsche’s philosophical thinking. As for education, Nietzsche’s philosophy provides a useful reference for an educational perspective that honours difference, incorporates [sic!] otherness, and problematises imposed solutions. (Fitzsimons, 2007, p. ix)

The themes of difference and otherness, as well as the opposition to imposed solutions – we recognize them all as central to Derrida’s philosophy.

On the level of ontology and epistemology, Derrida may be said to share with Nietzsche a «metaphysics of excess» (Zlomislic, 2007, p. 83) as well as an «epistemology of embracing uncertainty» (Zlomislic, 2007, p. 227). This has to do with Nietzsche’s perspectivism – reality as a plurality of interpretations – which corresponds to Derrida’s notion of dissemination (which it would take us too far to go into here; cf. Zlomislic, 2007, p. 83ff). However, Derrida’s emphasis on responsibility makes him point out the responsibility one has for the interpretation or perspective one chooses, and the consequences this choice has for the Other. For Nietzsche, the «responsibility» is only to myself; it is a question of whether the choice makes my life more full of joy and meaning. One could however argue that «the other» is not completely absent in Nietzsche’s ethical thinking: for him, self-realization means that there is a generous, heart-felt sense of abundance that flows out towards other beings. Perhaps this generous abundance is what makes the *aporia* endurable? And perhaps without it the program, the predetermined path of action, more easily tempts one?
Nietzsche advocated self-overcoming or self-surpassing as parts of the path of self-realization. On such a path:

[s]uffering is reconstituted as an energetic approach to life, as reconciliation and the creation of a higher self, and welcomed as necessary for strengthening the spirit in this earthly life. (Fitzsimons, 2007, p. 103)

Hence, Nietzsche’s ethics may be called agonistic. Agonism is an ethical stance that welcomes contest and «maintains a spirit of competition and adversarial respect» (Fitzsimons, 2007, p. 85). Derrida’s ethical thinking may also be seen as agonistic, in that it seems to welcome the aporia as the very condition of ethical action, and it appreciates all reminders of difference, or différence. The moment of responsible decision, the moment out of which the responsible subject is constituted, is suffered in the agony of madness. For Nietzsche, this is part of the path to the «higher self».

But this higher self is not a static being or essence, a potential to be finally realized and then everything is over. For Nietzsche «there is no being behind doing... the deed is everything» (Fitzsimons, 2007, p. 103). His so-called Übermensch is not the end result of a specific evolutionary process, but a journey without end, a bridge into the infinite. Even here there is a certain parallel in Derrida: for Derrida «the self» itself is never realized, it remains forever a promise. Howells quotes Derrida:

The self (soi), the autos of legitimating and legitimated auto-foundation remains to come ['à venir'], not as a future reality but as what will always keep the essential structure of a promise and can only come about as such, as to come ['à venir'; 'venir' as one word is, of course, the future]. (Howells, 1999, p. 153; comments by Howells)

**Nietzsche’s intellectual conscience**

There is a further parallel between the «aporetic ethics» of Derrida and Nietzsche’s notion of intellectual conscience, which I will go into more deeply below. Perhaps Derrida’s ethics can even be seen as an expansive development of Nietzsche’s intellectual conscience. That the conscience is «intellectual» puts it in contrast to, makes it distinct from, ordinary conscience, which is emotional: we usually feel our bad conscience. Similarly, Derrida’s concern with the conditions of possibility of ethics is an intellectual concern, and his critique of the «good conscience» that arises out of following a program – doing one’s duty – reminds one of Nietzsche urging us to develop an intellectual conscience behind or above what we ordinarily conceive of as conscience. For Nietzsche, our ordinary conscience is merely an emotional reaction out of our inherited «slave morality», based on resentment of the strong and noble.

The term intellectual conscience appears in Nietzsche’s (1974) «gay science». In spite of the title of the book, clearly meant to be anti-academic and anti-professorial, Nietzsche never denies the value of conscience and discipline in the activity of seeking true knowledge. He is opposed to anyone – scholar, scientist, or whatever – who believes that they have the truth. He encourages a notion of inquiry after truth as a perpetual struggle, in which truth exists only as long as the victor is not again defeated. Thus, he deepens and transforms the commonplace meaning of conscience and discipline in a radical way, not very different from Derrida. In the preface Nietzsche tells (presumably from his own experience) how the philosopher after «long and dangerous[!] exercises of self-mastery» emerges with a strong will «to question further, more deeply, severely,
harshly, evilly and quietly[!] than ever before (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 36).

Instead of distress there is a delight in what is problematic. The senses are merrier and the mind more childlike and more subtle. These may be taken as characteristics of an intellectually conscientious mind, in Nietzsche’s sense, even though he does not explicitly label them as such. However, the severe and deep questioning that Nietzsche intends is far from scientific rigor in the positivistic sense. This is clear from passages such as the following, from the preface:

Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, or to be present at everything, or to understand and «know» everything. (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 38)

Among other things, intellectual conscience is contrasted with the type of mind that can stand in the midst «of this whole marvellous uncertainty and rich ambiguity of existence without questioning, without trembling with the craving and rapture of such questioning» (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 76; italics in original). Intellectual conscience means the questioning of ordinary conscience:

Have you never heard of an intellectual conscience? A conscience behind your «consciences»? Your judgment «this is right» has a pre-history in your instincts, likes, dislikes, experiences, and lack of experiences. «How did it originate there?» you must ask, and then also: «What is it that impels me to listen to it?» (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 263 f.)

Self-reflection and self-questioning are thus the distinctive features of an intellectually conscientious search for knowledge. The aim strived for is not to finally possess the truth of things, but rather «to develop a more refined appreciation of our actions and identities» (Pearson, 2009, p. 242). The intellectual conscience involved in this joyful search for knowledge does not cause any bad feelings of guilt, but leads to the insight that whatever I have done, I did it because at that moment I was the person I was, such and such forces were driving me – now, I may be different. As Pippin puts it:

(D)isappointment that I was, not who I thought I was, sadness at what was expressed «in» the deed, replaces guilt, or the sort of guilt which depends on the claim that I could have done otherwise. (Pearson, 2009, p. 385)

The intellectual conscience is a conscience «behind» our ordinary conscience; it is the ability to scrutinize the latter for its hidden reasons and causes. Nietzsche admits that the motive behind this intense self-questioning is actually a «desire for certainty», which may be a surprise to those who find in Nietzsche’s philosophy the most radical anti-positivism. However, for Nietzsche, there is a profound difference between the general demand for certainty, and the individual – I would say existential – desire for it. The demand for certainty Nietzsche associates with the need for metaphysical beliefs as well as for scientific positivism. In the latter, the very demand for certainty actually leads to ease and negligence in its demonstration – a point worthy of much reflection:

Metaphysics is still needed by some: but so is that impetuous demand for certainty that today discharges itself among large numbers of people in a scientific-positivistic form. The demand that one wants by all means that something should be firm (while on account of the ardour of this demand one is easier and more negligent about the demonstration of this certainty) – this, too, is still the demand for a support, a prop. (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 288; italics in original)
Further on, in a section called «Science’ as a prejudice», Nietzsche criticises positivistic reductionism and exclaims:

What? Do we really want to permit existence to be degraded for us like this – reduced to a mere exercise for a calculator and an indoor diversion for mathematicians? Above all, one should not wish to divest existence of its rich ambiguity… (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 335; italics in original)

A scientific, or rather scientistic interpretation of the world – a positivistic and reductionist interpretation – would be the most stupid in the sense of being the poorest in meaning, Nietzsche maintains. Ambiguity and uncertainty are fundamental qualities of human existence in general – not least of educational practice we may add. Educational thinking with an intellectual conscience would never reduce or simplify the polysemic and ambiguous nature of educational phenomena.

What, then, would Nietzsche’s intellectual conscience mean in and for educational practice? Following Nietzsche (although he himself would abhor followers) it would seem to mean a severe, harsh, «evil» (but quiet!) and joyful questioning of all (or as many as are within the reach of our eagle eyes) uncertainties, ambiguities and dilemmas encountered in this practice. However, these things do not appear of themselves. Only to the attending and thoughtful mind do they show themselves as such. Hence the importance of alert senses and a childlike subtlety of mind.

The ambiguities and dilemmas embedded in education practice can never be solved, but they can be clarified; the multitude of meanings, norms, values and ideals that are at stake in particular or typical situations can be unpacked. By intellectual conscientiousness we may become more aware of the nature of the dilemmas we are confronted with, be encouraged to experiment with them, and thereby develop our personal, practical judgement, perhaps even becoming what Aristotle called phronimos (wise ones; cf. Dunne, 1993).

Dilemmas and aporia of education and schooling

Maybe what are commonly referred to as moral dilemmas can be seen as simply somewhat watered down versions of aporia. Aporia could also be taken as a philosophical transposition and amplification of the everyday experience of dilemmas. «Dilemmas» would then refer to relatively superficial experiences of particular situations, whereas aporia is the very condition of possibility of ethics. (However, these conditions are also experienced; Derrida never leaves the immanent for the transcendental.) From yet another point of view, particular dilemmas, such as the «dilemmas of schooling» reported by Berlak and Berlak (1981) – to which I will presently return – may be taken as suitable empirical illustrations of the aporia as the very condition of possibility of ethical actions.

It may also be noted that the notion of dilemma belongs to a moral and educational discourse of a rationalistic and monological character, viz. that of Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues (Kohlberg, 1981). Dilemmas involve conflicts between two or more values; nevertheless, the basic premise here is that they can be «solved». Of course, they are solved in different ways, depending on the level of moral development; and they are not solved without discussion and debate. But on the highest level, reason prevails and dilemmas may even be dissolved as illusions. Eventually, reason knows what to do. If it does not, we cannot or should not decide. In contrast, for Derrida the aporia can neither be solved nor dissolved, because there is nev-
enough knowledge or enough time. They can only be «experimented» with, and experienced. But they must be borne and endured, they do not go away.

We often recognise that there are dilemmas in our social practices, but we usually deal with them according to established ways, which means that we avoid the agonising experience of *aporia*. However, if the experience of a moral dilemma, of having to choose between two values which both seem equally important, is deepened and intensified, we may find ourselves in a no-way-out-situation: action is impossible, yet we have to act.

Berlak and Berlak (1981), in their study reported almost three decades ago, found that teachers are more or less continuously confronted with dilemmas of various kinds. They identified not less than sixteen different «dilemmas of schooling,» but it would take us too long to go into all of them here. They also suggested that these dilemmas could be taken as a heuristic model for explaining the complexity and contradictions that characterise teachers’ work.

The nature and content of some of the dilemmas Berlak and Berlak (1981) describe may have changed since their study was carried out. However there is hardly any doubt that teachers’ work is still loaded with the necessity of choosing between conflicting but equally justified values. In dealing with these dilemmas some teachers manage to find, as the authors call them, «transformative solutions», in which a synthesis of the conflicting values is achieved. Such solutions may be seen as specially successful and creative «experiments» in Derrida’s (1992) sense. One would expect that such achievements only come about by accepting the pressure of the *aporia*. Perhaps transformative solutions are the acme of teachers’ ethical actions.

One of the dilemmas Berlak and Berlak (1981) describe, which may have become even more relevant today, is that of «the child as pupil» versus «the whole child». Teachers often experience a conflict between on the one hand «giving» their children as much knowledge as possible, and on the other helping them to develop as personalities, to become «whole» human beings.

In our times, when learning is more and more drawn into the context of the economic competition between nations, the child as pupil – as knowledge assimilator or accumulator – is very much emphasised. On the other hand, there is still some lip service being paid to the ideal of the development of «the whole human being». How do teachers today «experience and experiment» with this dilemma? What transformative solutions could be found if we investigated what goes on in our schools with regard to this question?

Schooling and teaching consist to a large extent of «normal actions»: routines and scheduled activities and, on another level, «educational programs». To the extent that this normality predetermines teachers’ actions, ethics in Derrida’s sense seems, as we have seen, to be excluded. For ethics to exist in teachers’ work there must be an *aporia*, a choice between a normal, programmatic path of action and more or less «abnormal» alternatives, which deviate from expectations, routines or pre-set programs. If a teacher is to experiment with such a dilemma and act in an abnormal way, a measure of courage is always necessary.

This is illustrated by a quote from an interview with an in-service teacher, which I conducted some years ago.

**Teacher:** But perhaps I am bad at certain parts of Social Studies /…/ it feels sometimes that here one ought perhaps to have had a bit more [knowledge], the best students may get a bit to little /…/ Then perhaps I am bad at daring to give the students, well,
divide or individualise as it was called in the past, that is to give them what they actually need, and it is often the best [students] that doesn’t get enough.

Interviewer: What would you need in order to manage this?

Teacher: In my case a little courage because I guess I know what to do but I do not really dare to do it yet, [because] then it always comes this «you let your kids run down in the library»... Well, this could be managed but there I am weak, I don’t dare to break the pattern because the others [the other teachers] do not have this pattern.

In the schools of today, in some countries at least, «letting the kids run in the library» is perhaps not particularly uncommon. There may even be schools where it has become the way things should be done – except that the library has probably been virtually replaced by the www. But then the dilemma may become the opposite one: how do I dare not to use the Internet, when all my colleagues do it?

The interview quote illustrates the conflict between what Berlak and Berlak (1981) call «knowledge as content» and «knowledge as process». The teacher feels that (s)he lacks some «knowledge as content», which (s)he should be able to give to at least some of the students. Letting the students find the knowledge themselves, applying the idea of «knowledge as process», could compensate for this lack. However, then a third normative principle comes in: solidarity with one’s colleagues. The teacher did not seem to have the courage to experiment with this «possibility of the impossible», but simply followed the established «program», that is, the general pattern of the school where he was working.

Courage is a virtue in the Aristotelian sense; it is a trait of character, an emotional disposition more or less well established, but which can be practised and cultivated. Derrida’s view of the origin of ethics in the aпорія of the impossible may seem to be far from Aristotle’s view of ethics as the patient cultivation of virtuous habits. However, it may be that it is precisely this habitual cultivation of virtues that gives us the ability to face and experiment with the апорія, and – paradoxical as it may seem – to resist «the temptation of the ethical» in the Kierkegaardian sense. One of the original meanings of «virtue» is, after all, power. It takes some power to endure the madness of the moment of decision.

The present erosion of the conditions of possibility of ethics in education

It is possible, even probable, that the neo-liberal educational policies ascending throughout the world during recent decades have made educational practice more rigid and fixed. It is also possible that as a consequence teachers may have become more aware of the value conflicts and dilemmas inherent in their work. As Baker claims to demonstrate, апорія now operate in the very prescriptions of modern educational reforms and may thereby generate new forms of practice-engaged subjectivities:

Reforms have and do embody images of ideal ontologies and desire-management strategies suited to visions of a particular Utopia that are never quite achieved. (Baker, 2005, p. 46)

The never achieved utopian visions point to the discrepancy between what is expected and what is actually realized and realizable. The «scientific management» perspective (Neyland, 2010) and marketplace atmosphere of present educational policymaking give little nourishment to the desires and passions of creative teachers. Teachers’ practice is reduced to «working agreements». Agreements, or «deals», are the tokens of the market. Similarly, the grand and complex
idea of responsibility is cut down and impoverished to a one-dimensional concept of «duty» (cf. Neyland, 2010, p. 98f). Duty means following the program, the rules and the prescribed procedures, and thereby having (saving) one’s «good conscience»; being a responsible teacher (or student).

This is not to deny the necessity of rules and regulations. These become necessary when we move from the direct face-to-face encounter between the self and the Other into the area of justice «for all»; for instance for everybody in the class or in the school. But the prevalent concern for professional ethical standards and behaviour tend to overshadow and neglect the primary dimension of the encounter with the Other.

This «Ethics before ethics», where spontaneity and the «sovereign life expressions» of mutual trust, love and courage should thrive (Løgstrup, 1997), is forgotten in present day educational policymaking – if ever at any time it was remembered. Derrida (cf. Zlomislic, 2007, p. 251) does not deny the necessity of rules and regulations; his point is that their existence and our following of them do not in any way guarantee that our practice becomes ethical.

Hence, one may suspect that the very conditions under which teachers work today, produced by more or less neo-liberal educational policies, may erode the possibilities for an ethical approach to the dilemmas of schooling, maybe also for finding transformative solutions to them. Considering the degree of control exercised through outcome based curriculums and quality assurance mechanisms, education today have become more or less «a metaphor for government» (Fitzsimons, 2007, p. 153). Where there is government there is power, authority and pre-specified paths of action.

Nietzsche perhaps foresaw this state of affairs. In an unpublished note he prophesised that an economic government of the whole Earth will soon be established, «with mankind as a machine in service of this economy – as a tremendous clockwork, composed of ever smaller, ever more subtly ‘adapted’ gears» (in Fitzsimons, 2007, p. 153).

The suspicion that the conditions for ethical action are eroded has empirical support. To an increasing extent, teachers’ work today is no longer characterized by the continuous dealing with dilemmas, but with tensions or constraints. This is the claim of Woods, Jeffrey, Troman and Boyle (1997) in their study of the consequences of the UK Educational Reform Act (ERA) of 1988. Dilemmas arise when two moral ideals collide and the teacher must choose one and sacrifice the other, unless a transformative solution is found. Before, teachers became used to this condition of their work. In front of two possible paths they chose one and moved along with more or less regret that the other path could not also be followed.

Tensions arise when there is a significant reduction of choice in the dilemmatic situation; constraints arise when one is compelled to choose one path even against one’s better knowledge. The majority of primary teachers included in the study of Woods et. al. experienced their professional challenges as tensions and constraints. They felt demotivated and inadequate, and that their professional knowledge was devalued.

In an earlier study, Woods and Jeffrey (1996, p. 34 f.) claimed that the essential tension observed was that between «getting done» and «going with the flow». «Getting done» means following the curriculum plan with its specified learning outcomes; «going with the flow» means deviating from this plan by allowing the inspiration of the moment, enthusiasm and «tacit knowledge» to guide one’s pedagogical actions. In other words, «follow the program» and feel the pain of sacrificing creativity, passion and pos-
possibly joyful learning experiences, or «follow your heart» and risk being «irresponsible» to your teaching duties, failing to realize pre-specified learning outcomes.

Going with the flow needs time and mental space: time to be with the children, to potter about, to discuss with colleagues, to read, to listen; and space to reflect, and to have ideas. However, since the ERA «both time and space have been squeezed in the inexorable concern to 'get things done'» (Woods & Jeffrey, 1996, p. 38). This «inexorable concern» has turned what was once a bearable dilemma into a tension or, ultimately, a constraint.

The educational policy of the ERA is one example of the «scientific management» of education (Neyland, 2010). It is well known that this kind of policy has been most strongly implemented in the Anglo-Saxon countries (in particular the UK and New Zealand), but it is also recognized that it has its repercussions all over the world. A basic tenet of this policy is the outcome-based curriculum and the corresponding forms of assessment.

As a consequence, teachers as «curriculum managers» are becoming more and more overwhelmed by what they are supposed to achieve. As Neyland (2010) puts it, it is as if they can no longer choose one of two paths, but have to travel along both at the same time. They are no longer professional improvisers in the complex lifeworld of schools and classrooms, but jugglers dealing with an overabundance of flying objects.

What happens to the aporia under these conditions? Are they perhaps transformed into impossible tensions; tensions which are humanly impossible to bear; tensions which turn the teacher not into a professional dealer with dilemmas or an ethical actor under aporetic conditions, but a fragmented individuality split up into incongruent parts, each part trying dutifully to fulfil a particular «learning outcome» with little hope of ever succeeding to the satisfaction of everyone concerned.

This is a pessimistic and perhaps exaggerated picture, but the tendencies are obviously there. The aporetic subject, whose genuine responsibility was constituted in a moment of decision facing the aporos, meets with working conditions that constrain the response-ability following that decision. Thus the conditions for ethical action as conceived and described by Derrida are threatened with erosion by present day educational policies.

Education today has strong links with state policies and politics of education. The state even funds educational research because it expects some payback in the form of useful knowledge leading to so called evidence-based practice. Useful knowledge is knowledge that can be implemented in a program, a line of action, which has useful results. In other words, what is expected is precisely what Derrida calls «a certain knowledge [that] opens up the way in advance»; an authoritative knowledge that makes it possible for policy makers, administrators and teachers to «act in good conscience».

If teachers are expected to act on such bases, can they be intellectually conscientious in Nietzsche’s sense? Hardly. To the extent that research produces «certain knowledge», from which pre-set lines of pedagogical actions are deduced, conditions are created in which teachers can (or will, or have to) act without responsibility. And to the same extent the condition of possibility of ethics, the experience and experiment with aporia or dilemmas, is obliterated.

A non-programmatic conclusion

Teachers often expect guidance from educational theories and research, or more precisely from models of action based on theo-
ries and research. But if the condition of possibility of ethics is the experience and experimentation of aporia, ethics in education consists of cultivating an intellectual conscience and a kind of sensitivity to, even a taste for complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty. We need to become aware of the dilemmas and uncertainties that inevitably arise, whatever theory, model or program we follow.

Theories are, necessarily, one-sided conceptual visions of relations, processes and causes, seen from a particular point of view. This is not unethical in itself. But when practical consequences are drawn, we enter into the complexities and ambiguities of real life, of which the theory is only an abstract representation. In a similar way rules and regulations can certainly help to get us on the track of action in complex situations. But they can never guarantee that our actions are ethical or in accord with justice, in spite of the good conscience that following them may induce in us. Much of Derrida’s philosophical thinking seems geared towards clarifying these simple but, it seems, far from self-evident points.

Notes

1. This is of course not madness in a pathological sense, but a double-bind experience beyond rational comprehension. On the other hand, such experiences have been considered to be schizophrenic (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, 1956).

2. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra also advises us to be «true to the Earth». The Earth could play the role of the Other in Nietzsche’s philosophy, which thereby could form the basis of an environmental ethics.

Literature


