



Therapeutic Communities: The International Journal of Therapeutic Communities

Du choc des idées jaillit la lumière: thinking with Eric Broekaert's integrated and holistic paradigm of education

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Griet Roets, Paul Smeyers, Michel Vandebroek, Maria De Bie, Ilse Derluyn, Rudi Roose, Bruno Vanobbergen, Lieve Bradt, Angelo Van Gorp, (2017) "Du choc des idées jaillit la lumière: thinking with Eric Broekaert's integrated and holistic paradigm of education", *Therapeutic Communities: The International Journal of Therapeutic Communities*, Vol. 38 Issue: 3, pp.169-176, <https://doi.org/10.1108/TC-03-2017-0010>

Permanent link to this document:

<https://doi.org/10.1108/TC-03-2017-0010>

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https://doi.org/10.1108/TC-01-2017-0001

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Du choc des idées jaillit la lumière: thinking with Eric Broekaert's integrated and holistic paradigm of education

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to reflect on how Eric Broekaert perceived “Ortho-pedagogy” as an academic discipline.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The authors try to get a grasp on Broekaert's point of view while cross-reading three central articles in which he explains his integrated and holistic paradigm of education.*

Findings – *One could argue that, while claiming that the different epistemological, ontological and methodological approaches underlying Eric Broekaert's paradigm of holistic education are not easily integrated, the potential paradoxes he produced in this claim also enabled a “choc des idées” and challenged and enlightened a wide diversity of researchers and practitioners in taking a partial, locatable, critical, reflexive and temporary stance in educational praxis (Lather, 1991).*

Originality/value – *The authors discuss how Broekaert, as a companion in life, enabled them to cautiously embrace tensions, paradoxes and complexities in the development of an educational praxis.*

Keywords *Holistic, Critical stance, Empirical-analytical, Existential-phenomenological, Paradigm of education, Postmodern*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

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Introduction

In the hope to do justice to the intellectual and theoretical legwork of Eric Broekaert, we would first like to throw light on one of the many conversations with him. As the eye-opener of a last inspiring encounter of the first author of this contribution with Eric in an exotic Chinese restaurant, he quoted Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux's winged words “Du choc des idées jaillit la lumière!” (translation “Enlightenment comes when ideas clash and collide!”). At that moment, Eric was musing that he dared to invite people – and even women – here from time to time. He had a preference to invite them in Chinese restaurants that he considered as particular places where the pressure of academic life seemed to vanish in smoke and a productive space for dialogue emerged. In a wise and charming style, he explained that Boileau-Despréaux was a French poet, a critic who had a frankness of speech, wrote satires to attack the established order, and could be seen as a humanist philosopher *avant la lettre*. He used this quote as an entryway for our conversation.

In this contribution, we would like to continue this conversation and reflect on how he perceived “Ortho-pedagogy” as an academic discipline. We first try to get a grasp on Broekaert's point of view while cross-reading three central articles in which he explains his integrated and holistic paradigm of education (see Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, 2010, 2011). Second, we try to think with Broekaert while exploring our own paradigmatic position. Third, we reflect on how he enabled us to cautiously embrace tensions, paradoxes and complexities in the development of an educational praxis.

Received 7 March 2017
Revised 22 May 2017
24 May 2017
Accepted 24 May 2017

An integrated and holistic paradigm of education

In "The search for an integrated paradigm of care models for people with handicaps, disabilities and behavioural disorders at the Department of Orthopedagogy of Ghent University" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004), a review is made of a range of theoretical positions which have supported educational interventions for people with disabilities and behaviour disorders. Historically, so it is argued, action in the field of (special) education is theoretically rooted in a discipline known as "Ortho-pedagogy" and has taken the form of intervention undertaken by professionals. "The word 'Ortho-pedagogy' derives from Greek: the prefix *orthos* meaning right or correct and the word *ped* or *pais* meaning child. Agogy originates from *agein* and means action or doing. 'Pedagogy' is the 'science of education', and the prefix *ortho* distinguishes it from ordinary education, in that it implies a return to order (normality) (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 206)". Ortho-pedagogy was originally defined as a science of action aimed at children and adults experiencing difficulties in educational situations. Simple dichotomies were used such as normal/abnormal, sick/healthy, able/disabled, but it is argued that these are no longer tenable.

Thus Broekaert *et al.* (2004, 2010) take up the case for a new paradigm of understanding in order to better support professional "reflection in action". In doing that, the objective/realist position as well as the interpretive/subjective position is criticised. In that vein, they place much hope on "a synthesis of the different (existing) paradigms" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, 2010, p. 207) framed as theories of intervention integrated with methodological approaches: Man as Knowledge: the empirical-analytical paradigm; Man as Story: the existential-phenomenological paradigm, and Man as Justice: the critical paradigm. Broekaert *et al.* (2004, p. 210) broadly discuss these three paradigmatic strands, and first explain and discuss the critiques that are emerging when these paradigmatic worldviews influence the nature of (special) education. Where the lack of the objective/realist position is identified as "an independent ontological category that has validity and reliability, but does not relate to [the] person" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 208), the interpretive/subjective in seeking to map an individual within his/her life-historical process ignoring issues of "validity and reliability" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 209) and not looking for universal application. Attention is also paid to the critical paradigm which strives for social justice emphasising, for example, the environmental and social barriers that contribute to society's interpretation of impairment. However, this too is criticised for having "little impact" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 210) in social terms as it demands conditions which cannot be realized.

As we enter the postmodern age, Broekaert *et al.* (2004) observe, it is therefore no longer tenable to rely on one central and dominant theory by which to guide action, both for educational researchers and practitioners. The authors argue for what is labelled a postmodern critical quality of life and [the] human rights paradigm, since international developments in the field of disability or difference have led to different conceptions of what constitutes the core elements of the discipline: "Orthopedagogy takes as its focus the concept of 'improvement through educational practice' and seeks to establish processes and procedures based on in-depth understanding of the child" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 210). Thus an understanding is offered of complex systems through "the application of postmodern, constructivist/deconstructivist theories" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 210). This leads to a kind of disability studies that draws on a variety of disciplines and theorizes a political, social and ideological critique. The synthesis is based on holistic views: "the challenge is to develop a theory and practice which can meet the needs of the individual child and place him or her within an educational context creating the opportunity to participate in the community and become an integral part of it" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 210). The role of the educational specialist changes from direct provider to one of consultant; here social justice and empowerment are high on the agenda.

Though "[a]ll-embracing theories do not exist, but insights taken from different theories [can] help us" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 213), Broekaert *et al.* assert that "different theoretical positions need to be integrated to provide a model of intervention (and more importantly to provide understanding when not to intervene). In this sense, disability, person, community, society, and knowledge, experience and justice cannot be considered on their own, but are interdependent and transactional" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 213). Moreover, they insist that "care and support should

[not] proceed in an eclectic fashion” (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 213). The dynamic and interdependent transactions between different positions are seen from the view that parts and totality are in permanent organic interaction. This endeavour is characterised by uncertainty, but also characterised by a belief in the future, the uncertainty of improvement of an individual or group within a specific context at a particular time. The knowledge that is acquired is partial, there is no “one answer” as the experience is inevitably incomplete: “The professional and aspiring professional must subscribe to ‘open-mindedness’” (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 214).

Many of these ideas are reiterated in two later articles, *The human prerogative: a critical analysis of evidence-based and other paradigms of care in substance abuse treatment* (Broekaert *et al.*, 2010), and *the postmodern application of holistic education* (Broekaert *et al.*, 2011). In these contributions, the major paradigms are somewhat differently labelled (empirical-analytical, existential-phenomenological, and critical post-structural in Broekaert *et al.*, 2010 and dialectic-materialistic in Broekaert *et al.*, 2011), but in essence the kind of criticisms remain similar. In “*The human prerogative: a critical analysis of evidence-based and other paradigms of care in substance abuse treatment*” (Broekaert *et al.*, 2010), the authors assert that the holistic integration of paradigms is influenced by critiques on methodo-centric and ethnocentric approaches (see Broekaert *et al.*, 2010). The mechanism behind this search for holistic unity is framed as an integration between parts and totality where “various complementing (partial) approaches alternatively go together in their never-ending pursuit of unity and transformation of actual conditions. In such an integrated model, the going together of each element’s excluding aspects of reality is referred to as complementarity. The opposites are interchangeable and may replace each other in a series of transformations. This means that the system as a whole shifts to a new, higher order, a more complex structural form” (Broekaert *et al.*, 2010, p. 234). From this point of view, it is argued that the three paradigms are in conflict and exclude each other’s reality at first sight, but are internally connected and complete each other as a human endeavour; this interconnection is the human interconnection, called the human prerogative, the human dedication to achieving the best solution that benefits the well-being and human dignity of individuals who require (special) education and care (Broekaert *et al.*, 2010). In “*The postmodern application of holistic education*” (Broekaert *et al.*, 2011), the holistic approach is characterised by the whole that has to be seen as more than the sum of the parts and where everything is connected. Poststructuralism and postconstructivism give, so it is argued, some indications for the educational and social work practice such as the following important principles: open and experience learning, inclusion of the most vulnerable, critical and social emancipation, collaborative efforts and self-advocacy bearing witness of complementarity, integration, uncertainty, and transformation. As an example of how one of these principles is implemented and embraced in practice, Broekaert *et al.* (2011) reflect on a project in which the principle of self-advocacy is at the heart of what happens. While being personally involved in an ongoing close collaboration with activist members of the radical self-advocacy movement in Flanders, some educational researchers have been moving towards a critically engaged approach to disability studies and recently challenged the disabling society by writing and producing their *Musketeer Book* (Roets *et al.*, 2005). In this book, Broekaert *et al.* (2011) argue, the activists are the self-advocates of their own cause in a society that labels them as persons with a handicap. They discuss their work, home, hopes, dreams, freedoms, friends, good and bad times, resilience, past, present and future. They treat oneself and others as a topic of investigation that involves an interest in how people make sense of their world, their fears, disappointments, interests and excitements. This is a profoundly social activity in which unequal social conditions and relations involved are identified, understood and critically engaged (Roets *et al.*, 2005, pp. 55-6).

Thinking with Broekaert

It goes without saying that there is a lot of merit in the profound criticism of what is called the objectivist stance. It is still widely embraced by many working in this area, be it not in theory then certainly in practice. The criticism against this position has a long tradition (going back to Nietzsche) and has been aired in the many areas that study human behaviour, not in the least in the field of education and bringing up children. It remains, however, attractive and fuels new

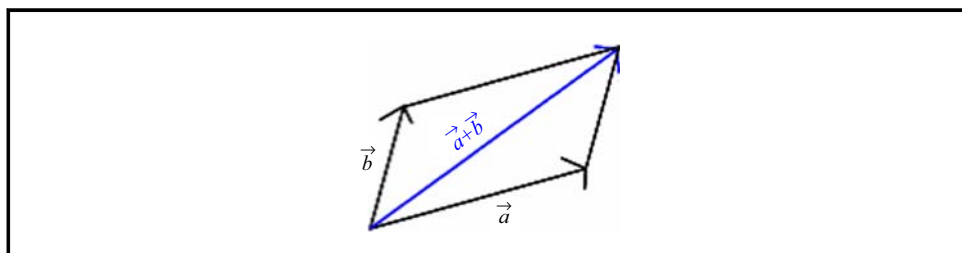
developments such as neuroscience. Already a long time ago the pitfalls of such a positivist stance have been elaborated. There are not only the problems of the naïve correspondence theory of truth (relying heavily on sense data), there is moreover a reductionism operative (e.g. in many kinds of neuroscience from the mentalism mind-body approach to the materialist brain-body approach). The abstraction of the historical, cultural, and social conditions is damaging for social sciences. So is the resistance to discuss aims and to limit scientific discussion to a means and reasoning. More in general what is not taken into account is the difference between, on the one hand, causality/probability/contingency and freedom/choice/responsibility/regret/remorse on the other hand, in explaining and understanding human behaviour. Most empirical-analytical research places itself within a model of addition and/or subtraction of factors or variables. The simplest model is that of what happens when you have two vectors and try to determine the resultant vector (Figure 1).

For interpretative research instead the metaphor would be that of a *Gestalt*. For example, in a narrative analysis the information comes from different sources: the researcher arranges events and actions by showing how they contribute to the evolution of a plot. The plot is the thematic line of the narrative, the narrative structure that shows how different events contribute to a narrative. The writing of it involves an analytical development, a dialectic between the data and the plot. The resulting narrative must not only fit the data but also bring out an order and a significance not apparent in the data as such. The result is not so much an account of the actual happening of events from an “objective” point of view, it is instead a particular reconstruction of that researcher. Not only in the conclusion that is offered the researcher is present, but s/he is involved all through the process (though differently as compared to the practitioner’s involvement). Interpretative research accepts that humans make sense of their life, and that to understand what they do one needs to enter the hermeneutic circle of human practices (see Smeyers and Burbules, 2006; for the role of philosophical reflection, see Smeyers and Smith, 2014). Broekaert seems to accept that but not all the way.

In that sense, the criticisms raised against the interpretive (elsewhere labelled the existential-phenomenological) stance are surely mistaken. Issues of reliability and validity do play a role in this area as well; they may be called differently, however, but that does not mean they have no part to play. And that the interpretative stance does not look for generalisation is not a shortcoming but characterises the approach. Understanding the particular comes at a price, i.e. giving up generalisation. That is fine as far as it goes, but implies that future cases cannot just be seen as replica of the past. One cannot have it both ways. In terms of knowledge, such in-depth understanding of a case, though it may help to understand future cases, cannot without further interpretation be applied to what one is newly confronted with.

In that vein, even more strange is the reproach against the critical stance. One of the critiques mentioned entail that “the critical paradigm has been translated into legal and economic terms, but has little impact in social terms” (Broekaert *et al.*, 2010, p. 210). Broekaert *et al.* (2010) refer to authors who fear that the critical paradigm demands societal conditions for people with severe and multiple impairments who are heavily dependent on care that cannot be realised, and therefore argue that the critical paradigm must focus on the concepts of relationships and community to underpin the idea that also this minority group can exercise their full range of rights. In other words, we consider this an extremely complex yet relevant educational issue that requires a radical and much more in-depth reconsideration of how substantive rights of disabled

Figure 1 Empirical-analytical thinking



people are acknowledged and vindicated by welfare states and negotiated by educational professionals while embracing differentiated manifestations of human interdependency (see Roets *et al.*, in press). Here, also Broekaert *et al.* (2010) take a stance against categorical and objectifying stereotypes that are inherent to a positivist and objectivist stance in the empirical-analytical paradigm.

Interestingly, however, Broekaert diagnoses that we need a synthesis of the different existing paradigms and everything has to be taken into account – for which he uses the label holistic. But there are constraints which can hardly be avoided and have to be dealt with if we want to do justice to a human educational praxis, but are not given due attention. The trouble with all-embracing theories is that they aspire to soak up all the light and in so doing, they tend to silence the political, social and ideological critique that is so dear to educational sciences. A salient example is the omnipresence of references to the neurosciences in the educational field since the turn of the twenty-first century. While the references to neuroscience are new as a phenomenon, the ways in which “Truth” is constructed in the educational sciences is historically much more characterised by continuity than change. One century ago, in the eugenic spirit of that time, it was the medical and prophylactic science that dominated the knowledge about how to educate one’s child. As it was assumed that it was education rather than anything else that caused poverty (De Gérando, 1826-1989) and poverty in turn was believed to endanger the social order (Velghe, 1919), a vast “dispositif” (Foucault, 2001, translation “mechanism”) was deployed to intervene in the education of the poor wo/man’s child. Poor parents were automatically associated with poor parenting. Today, a very similar discourse has become omnipresent:

A growing proportion of the US workforce will have been raised in disadvantaged environments that are associated with relatively high proportions of individuals with diminished cognitive and social skills. A cross-disciplinary examination of research in economics, developmental psychology, and neurobiology reveals a striking convergence on a set of common principles that account for the potent effects of early environment on the capacity for human skill development (Knudsen *et al.*, 2006, p. 10155).

Theories in general and all-embracing theories in particular are neither a-historical and what is considered as valuable and valid “Science” or “Truth” is always related to the socio-political context (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2010). The present context is marked by a “new social question” (Rosanvallon, 1995), the bitter conclusion that inequality and poverty are rising rather than diminishing, that the welfare state is far from efficient and we therefore may as well downsize it, as it is claimed that there is no alternative for the market. In that context, educational responsibilities are individual, rather than social. As Furedi (2014, pp. ix-x) argued:

When leading politicians on both sides of the Atlantic can argue that bad parenting harms more children than poverty, then it becomes evident that parental determinism has become the mirror image of economic determinism.

It does not come as a surprise that in that context the neurosciences with their alleged materialisation of education (I am my brain) are proposed as an all-encompassing theory that will guide educational sciences as well as our social and political deeds (e.g. Gormley, 2011; Shonkoff and Bales, 2011; Shonkoff and Leavitt, 2010). Neurosciences are used to explain the intergenerational transmission of poverty, turning poverty – again – into a matter of parental skills and education into an econometric matter of return on investment (e.g. Heckman, 2006), despite the severe critics of leading neuroscientists opposing this misuse of their science (e.g. Blakemore and Frith, 2005; Bruer, 2011; Rose and Rose, 2016). The language of neuroscience, its accompanying vocabulary of critical periods and toxic stress, together with the reduction of education as an economic activity are now being taken over by international NGO’s, including UNICEF (2014), United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (2012), save the children (Finnegan and Lawton, 2016) and many others, as well as by practitioners in the field of education and parent support (Boyle, 2016).

This example shows how educational professions are increasingly and intrinsically caught in changing historical and social arrangements that reflect “the disappearance of ‘the social question’ from public and political debates and the attempt to shift the attention in public policy away from the enhancement of social solidarity” (Lorenz, 2016, p. 6). As an example, Lorenz (2016) refers to how the key tenets of scientific positivism have been influential in

re-framing the social question as a question of social biology, which represents a characteristic thrust of modernity which was promoted by the Enlightenment movement and spread from the sphere of science and philosophy into those of economics and politics, a thrust which we experience with renewed force today. In that vein, Lorenz (2016, p. 6) argues aptly that there is the danger that professional discourses and methods accommodate to these positivist and individualist leanings and to the “postmodern” relativisation of critical value positions, and “become detached from fundamental political and ethical questions of justice and equality and absorbed in a functional or even defeatist mentality of ‘there is no alternative’ to the privatisation of social responsibilities”. We therefore follow Lorenz (2016, p. 14) call for educational practitioners and researchers to urgently (re)claim a critical stance and raise the “social question” anew in changing circumstances:

It is the question of how to relate the right to individual freedom and hence diversity in identities to the necessities of a social order and coherence based on principles of justice and equality. In every act of intervention social workers therefore address not just “private troubles” but treat them in relation to public issues [...]. “Social” means building and respecting bonds and reciprocity beyond the personal sphere. It means furthermore treating these bonds not as fixed entities but, according to the other tenet of modernity, as the subject of reflexive negotiations. In practice this means that clashes of interests in the social sphere is unavoidable and cannot be resolved with reference to seemingly neutral scientific criteria.

Broekaert as a companion in life

In times that complicated questions and situations in educational practices often cut to the bone, however, it is remarkable that more than anybody else Eric Broekaert had the gift to challenge and enable scholars in the development of an educational praxis. At first sight Broekaert seems to go in the direction of giving attention to the particular. He talks of partial knowledge, and that there is not one answer. Yet it is confusing to read that, on the one hand, “the search for a global, whole or integrative theory remains an illusory task”, but on the other hand, “different theoretical positions need to be integrated to provide a model of intervention” which is “not to suggest that education, care and support [...] should proceed in an eclectic fashion” (Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, p. 213). In other words, it might be paradoxical how he stresses that all-embracing theories have no place, yet simultaneously tries hard to offer a theory that does integrate all relevant perspectives in dynamic and methodical ways. In a nutshell, we think there might be a serious danger in the creation of an all-encompassing, integrated and holistic educational paradigm; this may lead to a democratic deficit. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) have rightly argued, the problem with a paradigm is not that there is one, but there is an immense danger when it is presented as if there is none. There is nothing more dangerous than a dictatorship, except a dictatorship denying that it is a dominant dictatorship. A hegemonic (and therefore implicit) paradigm crucially excludes disagreement, while education deals necessarily and intrinsically with the ethical question what might represent and contribute to a human flourishing of us all. If the answer to that question is left to a singular “Science”, that would be anti-democratic and thus anti-educational, as it would deny parents, children, educators and a diversity of other actors in our societies who shape education from participating in a public debate about the meaningfulness of educational praxis. As any all-encompassing theory is inevitably embedded in a particular worldview that also inevitably implies a political, ideological, ontological and epistemological standpoint that is embedded in a particular geography and history, an all-encompassing, dominant theory can mean the end of pedagogy and education. As a result, the desire for an overarching theory cannot but be in continuous tension with the eclectic bricolages, that marked much of the work of Broekaert.

What Broekaert therefore means, we think, is that above all open-mindedness should characterize an educational approach. Possibly, we, that is the professionals and researchers, have to learn to live with various tensions. And further, there may be a need of direction – autonomy rightly understood remains the goal of education. The relational autonomy of the child or adult requires one or other way of guidance, which implies for the professional not only to listen and take into account the subject’s experience, but to offer ways to proceed (albeit revisable ways, see, e.g. of such an educational commitment Vandekinderen and Roets, 2016; Roets *et al.*, in press). It is possible that Broekaert’s preoccupation lies there more than anywhere else.

Such a reading may take the burden away from labels such as postmodernist, poststructuralist, deconstructionist, or holistic, though they do some work in this area to understand what one is up to, they remain somewhat artificial. The field of education is foremost a practice driven by what appeals to those involved, and not a domain where theoretical insights are simply applied. One could argue that, while claiming that the different epistemological, ontological and methodological approaches underlying his paradigm of holistic education are not easily integrated, the potential paradoxes he produced in this claim also enabled a “choc des idées” and challenged and enlightened a wide diversity of researchers and practitioners in taking a partial, locatable, critical, reflexive and temporary stance in educational praxis (Lather, 1991). As Lather (1991, p. 102) argued aptly, at times when sometimes seemingly the ground is being swept from under our feet, “perhaps it is timely for beings with legs to talk about how it is possible to take a stand – and whether it is impossible not to”. At least (and not at last), we enjoyed the ways in which our thoughts were challenged during our many conversations, and he will remain our *compagnon de route* for many years.

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