

## **Corporeality, equality and education.**

### **A biopedagogical perspective**

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In this article I develop a new perspective on the role and the position of the human body in the world of education. The interest in the theme of corporeality is of course far from new, and this applies not only to the field of social sciences in general (where in the last two decades a ‘corporeal turn’ has taken place, see Sheets-Johnstone 2009), but also to the field of educational theory. This (re)new(ed) interest in the body was welcomed by many scholars, because in education corporeality used to be dealt with in a condescending manner or it has been the object of oppressive measures (e.g. O’Farrel et al. 2000, Estola & Elbaz-Luwissh 2003, Bresler 2004, Watkins 2007, Zembylas 2007; Macintyre Latta & Buck 2008, Kraus 2008). As a result of the existence of dualist prejudices (i.e. the idea that we are essentially our minds and that the body solely is some vehicle) and an intellectualist view on the primary aims of education (viz. cognitive growth), these authors claim that the body used to be considered as either without real importance for education, or as a nuisance which interferes with these main objectives of education. Due to recent cultural, scientific and theoretical evolutions, which I discuss in the first part of this article, it has become very difficult to defend such a view (although there are some hardliners who persevere in it, see e.g. Barrow 2008) and so more and more the body gets its fair share of attention and recognition, at least in current theories of education.

I wholeheartedly support this recent appraisal of corporeality, but at the same time I want to raise some critical questions in regard with the way in which the relationship between the

body and education is usually conceived. In the second part of this article I will raise two fundamental objections. The first is that to these so-called body-centered pedagogies, the corporeal appears in a *stereotypical* way, viz. as a source of intentionality and meaning we have forgotten about and which we should put at work again. This concerns a paradigm set by authors like Ryle and Merleau-Ponty, which is still dominant today. My point is, paradoxically as it might seem, that this way of dealing with the body eventually results in an actual *negation* of the body. My second objection is that the proclaimed corporeal turn might have taken place in theory, but that in concrete pedagogical practices this is not the case at all: in the every-day world of education the body is still a matter of no importance or it is carefully kept under control. Of course, this discrepancy between theory and practice might be easily explained by saying that dualist and intellectualist prejudices are quite persistent and that time is not yet ripe for a truly body-centered pedagogy. However, in my view this account only explains the problem away: it doesn't help us in understanding why the body had - and most likely still has - such a 'bad reputation' in the first place.

Therefore, in a third and fourth part, I engage with another point of view on these matters, which goes back to the work of Michel Foucault, and which is commonly referred to as 'biopolitical'. To be clear from the start, I only partially agree with this school of thought. I try to articulate some basic insights behind biopolitical views on corporeality and education, but at the same time I try to elaborate these insights further and to take a critical distance. It is not my intention to give an extensive and exhaustive overview of these theories: my sole aim is to show how a biopolitical account might respond to the two objections I just mentioned. First, a biopolitical view allows for a different view than the stereotypical, Merleau-Pontian, idea that the body is important in so far and only in so far it is a source of meaning. This is because the body is considered *in its full physicality*. Second, a biopolitical perspective grants a more adequate understanding of why it is that the body – in spite of a corporeal turn in

theory – is still ignored or suppressed in daily educational practice. This is because the body, in its physicality, possesses an intrinsically *anarchic* force. Therefore it constitutes in and of itself a danger to any existing societal or pedagogical order. I agree with these two claims, but there is a more general problem with this point-of-view, viz. it is too one-dimensional. Being completely interested in explaining how humankind gets subjected to regimes of productivity, it omits to explicate that the body, in its physicality, might also be a *positive* (rather than a merely anarchical) force and that for this reason it might be educationally relevant. Therefore, I want to go beyond existing *bio-political* analyses of education, in order to contribute to an initial impetus regarding the development of an entirely positive *bio-pedagogy* (Cf. Lewis 2009b).

I can imagine that to many readers the reference I make to the body ‘in its full physicality’ sounds as a superseded and even dangerous thought. After all, thanks to the work of post-structuralist and especially feminist authors it has become evident that we never have direct contact with our bodies, that all experience (and thus also corporeal experience) is mediated through social, cultural and other categories and – above all- that any recourse on ‘the body’ (as it appears, for instance, in biology or medicine) is always a construction which masks power relations behind so called ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ discourse. I do agree with these criticisms, at least if the notion ‘physicality’ is taken to refer to an objective level of reality or a dimension with a universal truth-value. However, in the fifth part of this article, I explain that this notion can be used in a different sense, and more precisely to refer to a kind of *experience in which we fully affirm the corporeal side of our existence* (irrespective of the fact whether or not we have objective insight into this condition). To elucidate this, I turn to concrete examples of moments during which we entirely coincide with our ‘flesh’. An obvious place to look is the world of *physical* education, to which I refer throughout this article. However, I will also discuss the phenomenon of laughter, which is a clear example of

a strong corporeal experience that has the power to interrupt the pedagogical order and to which education has always had an ambivalent attitude. I have pursued more extensive discussions of these examples in other articles (e.g. Vlieghe 2012, 2013, 2014), but because of limitations of space, I can only deal with them briefly, and so these examples should be taken as illustrations of what a biopedagogical analysis of concrete educational moments and practices might look like.

The major source I rely on for constructing (a first sketch of) such a biopedagogical framework is the work of Giorgio Agamben. Again, this might seem odd, not only because Agamben is mostly not considered as a thinker who positively values the body in its physicality, but also because other authors and schools-of-thought more easily come to mind – such as new materialist philosophies, which grant an autonomous agency to the material body (e.g. Barad 2003 and De Landa 2006) or theories that explicitly conceptualize dimensions of corporeality that are non-reducible to the level of linguistic meaning (like sensation and affect in the work of Massumi 2002 or Berlant 2011). Nevertheless, from an educational point of view, the work of Agamben is more interesting, because he links considerations on the body to what he calls ‘potentiality’, i.e. a strong experience that there is *no necessity* in any given way of organizing our personal and collective lives. The plea for biopedagogy I hold in this article is precisely concerned with this possibility that indeed *everything might begin anew* – which to the Arendtian tradition in educational philosophy is precisely the very ‘essence’ of education (Arendt 1958; Cf. Lewis 2009b) .

## THE CORPOREAL TURN IN EDUCATION

Although within pedagogical theory the very issue of corporeality has been for a long time absent or has been considered from a negative point of view, it is no longer disregarded or disparaged today. This is partly due to changes in our life conditions where embodiment is

less and less considered as a hindrance to a flourishing life, and more and more as a site of self-development: consider for instance the era before the invention of birth-control, in which the (pregnant) body was experienced as a fate one just *had to* undergo (Juvin 2005). Next to this, there is an increasing interest in the body resulting from scientific discoveries regarding the physiological and evolutionary basis of all human behavior (e.g. Rittelmeyer 2002) or the role of mirror-neurons (Rizzolatti & Craighero 2004). This renewed interest is also connected to recent developments in philosophy and social sciences, which have wiped the floor with the intellectualist and dualist prejudices I mentioned earlier. I will focus in what follows on these last developments.

Due to the work of philosophers such as Dewey (1938), Ryle (1945) and especially Merleau-Ponty (2002), it is, *first*, no longer convincing to single out ‘purely intellectual’ capacities: even the most abstract ways of relating to the world, e.g. on the basis of mathematical concepts, presuppose concrete embodied practices (Moore and Yamamoto 1988; Sheets-Johnstone 1990). We prefer for instance a decimal system because mathematics originated in the embodied practice of counting on ten fingers. And, the very possibility to reflect upon ourselves as self-conscious beings can be brought back to ‘raw’ sensory experiences of bodily contact (touching and being touched upon, see: Anzieu 1986). It is the body that shapes the mind (Gallagher 2005), and concrete educational practices should take this into consideration, e.g. by allowing students to demonstrate their *embodied knowledge* of scientific concepts by actually *using their whole repertoire of bodily gestures* (see Pozzer-Ardenghi, & Roth 2007).

*Second*, it has also become clear that the most important things to learn shouldn’t be explained in terms of *mere cognition*, i.e. in terms of *knowing that* (Ryle 1945). In social justice education, for instance, teachers shouldn’t restrict courses to transmitting knowledge about conditions that lead to a discriminatory attitude, but should appeal to *how it feels* belonging to a minority and being offended for that reason. Social justice education will

therefore only be successful if it succeeds in stimulating genuine experiences of empathy. To this view, educators should understand that intolerant attitudes result from a condition of *corporeal* insensitivity. As long as one hasn't gone through a bodily lived sensation of being discriminated, issues such as racism, sexism or homophobia have only little significance, in the same manner that the difference between (particular) colors has no meaning to people afflicted with color blindness. Trying to convert a racist student on mere rational grounds is equally pointless as trying to explain the difference between sour and sweet to someone born without taste buds (Shapiro 1999; Cf. Shusterman 2004, who suggests that xenophobic attitudes are based on muscular experiences of contraction and inhibition, and that students should first of all become aware of these bodily responses in order to become more tolerant).

*Third*, the body itself can no longer be understood in purely mechanical terms, because we have come to understand (in spite of a very persistent prejudice regarding the mind as the origin and sole container of meaning) that it is *in and of itself* a carrier of meaning: the body has its own, unreflective intentionality (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 160). Consider the fact that many people acquainted with typing on a fingerboard are able to type almost blindly any text, although they couldn't consciously reproduce the arrangement of the characters when asked to. This is, however, not to say that we should overthrow the old hierarchy of the mind over the body in favor of the last. This rather means that it makes no sense to oppose the two. Dualism has become a superseded account of humankind and, bearing this in mind, it should be admitted that full self-actualization also comprises the development of possibilities that were formerly considered as 'merely' bodily matters. For instance, sport activities should be stimulated in schools, *not only* because they serve a basic level of health and contribute to the development of 'technomotor' skills, *but all the more* because they promote a richer human existence and the development of 'sociomotor' and 'cognitive-reflective' skills, such as the ability to cooperate, to exert leadership, to cope with winning and losing, etc. (Crum 2008).

Physical education might even be concerned with a broader goal that transcends specific competencies: ‘physical literacy’ (Whitehead 2007), i.e. the (maximal) development of our potential for movement, as well as the ability to see this objective as an essential dimension of a qualitative human existence.

In view of all these arguments, it seems to follow, that intellectualist accounts of education and dualist views on humankind have lost all relevance, that the long-forgotten or repressed body should be set free, and moreover that it should be recognized as an important or even essential part of educational processes. Therefore, in order to reach the educational goals we envisage, we would be ill advised if we, as educationalists, would not put the body at work. Nevertheless, in this article I will defend ideas which differ profoundly from this main-stream view on education and corporeality. This is not because I am against a body-centered approach to education, but because I see at least two inoperable problems with the main-stream view. I discuss these problems in the following part.

#### A SO-CALLED BODY-CENTERED APPROACH

*First*, it could be argued that this main-stream view, which *claims* to have finished of dualist accounts and to have (re)discovered the body, is not necessarily taking human embodiment more seriously. I am not questioning that this view is sincerely concerned with the issue of corporeality and that it seeks to set our thoughts free from an intellectualist burden. Nonetheless, I argue that it merely concerns well-meant initiatives of bodily emancipation which in the end imply again an instrumentalization of the body. This is because the main-stream view regards the body solely as something valuable *as far as it can be put to use*, i.e. as far as it can serve already established educational goals. More precisely, this approach demands us to acknowledge that the body is itself a source of meaning *because* it will optimize math training, to bring into play bodily-lived-through experiences of exclusion *in*

*view of a more successful social justice education, to develop motor capacities in order to guarantee the flourishing of human potential, etc..*

I don't intend to query that such a body-centered pedagogy actually contributes to a more efficient (and more personally fulfilling) imparting of knowledge, virtue and physical literacy. Neither am I concerned with casting a doubt on the value of these educational objectives. The only criticism I want to bring forward is *that to the main-stream approach the body always appears in a functional way and only in a functional way*: although the corporeal is at first sight completely taken into account, it appears only as a dimension of significance *because* it is indispensable for reaching *aims that have little to do with the body itself*. The body appears either as an instrument one should better put at use to improve the outcome of educational processes (such as the transference of knowledge and value), or as the ground for the complete flourishing of individual and collective existence. It appears thus fully *as a resource* (to which traditional forms of education have not as yet paid enough attention) and has no educational relevance in and of itself. The body in so far it is *body* doesn't truly matter.

I could add to this line of criticism the following objection which Jean-Luc Nancy raised regarding the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, and which also applies to the so called corporeal turn I just discussed. Merleau-Ponty essentially defends a more body-centred approach on the basis of the argument that the body possesses a pre-reflexive *intentionality* and that it is the source of all *meaning-constitution*. This is to say that the significance of corporeity is understood in *exactly the same terms* that were essential to intellectualist and dualist views. In doing this, Nancy comments, 'we turn the body into a soul in the traditional sense: the signifying body, the expressive body [...]. In saying this, we put the body in the place of the soul or the spirit.' (Nancy 2008, p.133) In other words, the body is regarded as (educationally) important *only because* it is capable of performing precisely these activities that for a long time were supposed to be the privilege of the solemn life of mind. This view is thus still



relying on the account of humankind it was supposed to be critical to, and the body *as body* still remains absent.

Next to these philosophical difficulties with the main-stream view on education and the body, there is a *second* problem, which relates to the discrepancy between the theoretical (re)appraisal of the body and the actual position of the body in concrete, day-to-day, educational reality. As McWilliam for instance argues, life in today's classrooms expresses a far going *denial of human embodiment*. A telling illustration is the moral panic that exists in connection with the touching of student's bodies: the attitude to be constantly on one's guard not to perform the slightest touch has currently become a basic constituent of teachers' professional identity (See McWilliam 2003). Consider also the difficulty many people feel when having to admit that their interest for a subject matter followed from a sort of 'infection' by 'passionate' teachers who lost themselves in a very corporeal way in this subject. We prefer to conceive educational processes in psychometric categories such as motivation, instead of taking seriously the idea that initiation into worthwhile disciplines actually goes through the body (McWilliam 1996). This somatophobia is also to be encountered in teacher training courses where the body seems more often than not disregarded (Macintyre Latta & Buck 2008).

How should we react to this discrepancy? A first and obvious explanation consists in saying that intellectualist assumptions regarding the true goals of education are very difficult to eradicate and therefore stubbornly persist (against our better knowledge, so to speak). In other words: even if in other spheres of human existence a corporeal turn clearly has taken place (Cf. Juvin 2005), we still seem to be inclined to deal with teaching and learning as processes that takes place between disembodied minds. I think, however, that this kind of reasoning cuts no ice: this type of 'explanation' is in reality only a description of a state of affairs. It says that there is a prejudice, but it doesn't say why this prejudice exists. And so *the problem in*

*question is just explained away.* Therefore I believe it to be a very pertinent *and* pressing issue to understand *why* this intellectualist tradition exists (and persists) in the first place, and also why this negative attitude towards corporeity is to be found *precisely* in the educational sphere (rather than elsewhere). In order to come to terms with this issue, I turn to what might be called a *biopolitical* perspective on corporeality and education. This school of thought will also help me to address the first set of criticisms to the main-stream, Merleau-Pontian view (viz. that it lacks an appreciation for the body *per se* because in the end the body is turned into a resource or an instrument *for* educational purposes that have nothing to do with the body). I should immediately add, however, that I won't support this biopolitical view to the full extent. I regard the biopolitical perspective only as a first step in the direction of conceiving the meaning of corporeality in and for education in an entirely positive way and as a precursor of a not as yet explored idea of body-centered education (i.e. biopedagogy).

#### BIOPOLITICS AND THE ANARCHIC POWER OF THE BODY

To a biopolitical approach the existing educational apparatus appears as a social power technology that goes back to the rise of Modernity and that aims at the continuation of a political regime which governs by means of shaping and controlling the life of individuals (cf. Foucault 1976, Freund 1982). To this view the issue of the position and the role of corporeity in education should be considered in terms of *the particular threat the body constitutes vis-à-vis the existing societal regime*. This is because the visceral and affective potential that is intrinsic to embodied life poses a problem to the way in which individual and social existence is organized in modern societies. More precisely, from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century on the most detailed aspects of (embodied) life became the object of political steering and management, demanding that each and every individual should display a high degree of self-control and self-constraint, especially in relation to unbridled and unproductive bodily urges. Whereas in Premodern times governance was concerned with ruling over a *territory* (rather than over

individual people) and power was paradigmatically exerted on the scaffold, where the sovereign king could manifest his (arbitrarily) control over the *death* (of rare insurrectionary individuals), the object of Modern forms of government is *the productive life of its citizens*, and more precisely of *each and all* of its citizens (Foucault 1981). In this way modern subjectivity got produced: the optimal flourishing of each individual life is important, because a well-functioning society demands that all its members contribute maximally to the greater whole. This evolution simultaneously implied that spontaneous and Dionysian expressions of corporal vitality should be (at least partly) suppressed, tamed or canalized for proper (i.e. efficient) use. Natural tendencies for rest or playful activity were equally out of place. Hence the need for mass schooling, the major aim (and hidden curriculum) of which consisted in bringing the body to silence, i.e. transforming embodied life according to the model of an optimally functioning machine. What we learn through schooling is not in the first place to master foreign languages or to become acquainted with history, but to get up every morning at half past six and to sit still for about eight hours a day (Cf. Deacon 2005), or to keep on working without ‘wasting’ our time with toiletry breaks (Cf. Inglis & Holmes 2000) .

This might be illustrated by a short exploration of the discipline ‘physical education’. Since its origin in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, this discipline has consisted mainly in repetitive gymnastic exercises and quasi-military forms of drill (Gleyse 1997). The whole idea of organizing physical education in schools originated around the same time in which scientists discovered that the body could be described and managed in purely mechanical terms. Adam Smith, for instance, was one of the first to understand that bodily activity might be made intelligible and controllable by comparing it to the then recently developed steam engine. That is why he could raise the complaint that the kinetic power of human beings was as little as one-seventh of that of a horse, which could then be measured exactly for the first time (Ibid., p. 232). And so it became evident to search for industrially and scientifically based solutions to improve

this mediocre energetic potential (or lack in ‘horse power’) and to put corporal energies at work. Hence the necessity to school bodies, i.e. to impose on them fixed rhythms and discipline, so that they became productive, reliable and efficient tools for society. This was the beginning of a history of a far-going instrumentalization of the body, and also of an era of ‘bioschooling’ (Lewis 2009a), the aim of which was to install a mechanical way of looking at our embodied selves.

It might be objected that such a biopolitical take on education no longer holds true in the contemporary world: in the wake of the evolution towards a globalized, Post-Fordist economy, society demands above all that its members look at themselves as compliant and employable subjects, rather than as machine-like tools. It is of the order of the day to be flexible and constantly willing to adapt oneself, and to renounce to an all too static or coherent life narrative or ‘character’ (Sennett, 1998). Instead, collective prosperity is believed to be dependent upon the willingness of all to be constantly capitalizing our own lives within a harsh and never ending contest. In that sense we are all in competition with one another, but we are above all also constantly *in competition with ourselves*. Therefore, as McWilliam (2000) has shown, this evolution hasn’t really changed a thing in regards to the instrumental relation we tend to have towards our bodies: again, the eccentricity of embodied life thwarts the desire to maximally develop one’s resources and talents (‘excellence’) Post-Fordist societies are typically concerned with. A strict control over the body is still required. It remains a major societal demand to install (through education) an instrumental relation to corporeity, even if this is no longer a mechanical relation. Anyway, this implies that biopower is still operative, be it in a less visible way.

Consider again the world of movement education and the idea that the obsolete practice of repetitive gymnastics played a role in the instrumentalization of the body. At first sight, it seems obvious that the large-scale introduction since the 60’s of sport, games, athletics,

dance, outdoor activities, etc. (at the cost of drill and gymnastics) constitutes a genuine emancipation from the biopolitical reign over the body. However, having a closer look at this evolution, it can however be argued, as Kirk (1998) does, that this reformed version of physical education has brought about only a 'looser form of power over the body'. This is to say that the existing biopolitical technologies just changed their locus and modus operandi: the installation of an instrumental relation to the body no longer takes place in a collective manner or under the direct control of a teacher blowing her whistle, but at an individual level and according to (no less harsh) regulations sportswomen impose upon themselves.

In conclusion, these illustrations show, at least to a biopolitical perspective, that there exist very good reasons why the body never met with much positive appreciation – and still cannot: because corporeal energies and tendencies (when not properly restrained and controlled) contradict the demands of productivity and excellence, the body forms a threat to the societal regime. Hence the need to impose a pedagogical regime which aims at taming and rendering subservient this anarchic force.

## BEYOND BIOPOLITICS: THE INTRINSICALLY EDUCATIONAL MEANING OF THE BODY

As I announced, it is not my intention in this article to argue for a biopolitical approach, although it certainly offers a strong and inspiring framework for thinking alternatively about the relationship between corporeality and education, and more specifically in ways beyond the main-stream view (à la Merleau-Ponty) I discussed in the first part. Contrary to these so called body-centered theories, the biopolitical perspective does take the body seriously in its full physicality. Whilst the dominant view in the end *reduces the body* to an instrument or resource for something that has nothing to do with the body, a biopolitical analysis of education precisely *starts from the body* (and more specifically from its intrinsically anarchic

powers). Moreover, this kind of analysis offers a much more compelling account for the discrepancy between theory and practice, i.e. between the simultaneous presence of a growing, positive attention for the body at the level of educational theory *and* a disparaging, sometimes even repressive attitude towards corporeality which exists in practice. As I explained, it doesn't help to blame this to the persistence of intellectualist or dualist conceptions - a line of reasoning which merely explains away the issue why the body poses a problem to education in the first place. A biopolitical perspective on the contrary offers a true explanation of this inconsistency: the body keeps its problematic character in educational practice, *because* the spontaneous inclinations and energies our bodies possess are antithetical to the existing societal order.

In spite of this, I don't think that a theoretical analysis of the interrelationship between education and the body should stop at this point. Although the biopolitical point of view has the benefit of drawing our attention back to the body *as such*, it is also a rather one-dimensional view with its own shortcomings. This is because it explains the problematic relation between education and the body in relation to a societal order which is preoccupied with (economical) productivity: the body spontaneously leans to an excess or to a lack of productiveness and this demands that it should not be left to its own devices (which means that it should be drilled, repressed or forgotten). This is problematic for at least two reasons.

First, to this line of argument the body is seen in a purely *negative* way. This is to say that corporeality is treated as a dimension of our lives that is *not* in line with certain societal demands, and therefore a danger to take care of. Corporeality is merely considered as the reverse side of order. As such the possibility is excluded that this anarchic and disruptive force itself might follow from more positive characteristics of embodied life. A second shortcoming of a biopolitical point of view is that it has difficulties to give any *educational* meaning or role to corporeality. It has little to say about what it would imply if the societal

regulation it criticizes (i.e. the neglect or repression of the body) would disappear one day. So, granted that – in a broad and charitable interpretation of the biopolitical account – we might read a call to free the body from the existing educational apparatus (in view of the systemically oppressive role it plays), it remains very difficult to see what might constitute the educational significance of the body when it is given (back) its full due. Furthermore, to this view the *only* way to conceptualize education is in terms of its conservative role: it is an instrument for societal regulation. It is thus difficult to conceive in an affirmative sense what a body-centered education might look like.

What is missing is *a positive and more substantial account of corporeality which moreover explains why it is educationally significant*. I will, in the remaining parts of this article, take a first step in developing precisely such an account. In other words: instead of seeking to set the body free from (a productivity-oriented form of) education, I try to *rethink education from the standpoint of the body*, i.e. to formulate an idea of education that is concerned with the positive and even emancipatory side of corporeality. To distinguish and oppose my view from a biopolitical approach, I propose to use the term *biopedagogy*, following Lewis (2009b) on this point. With this term I refer to a full affirmation of embodied life which as such constitutes an educational event.

Before elaborating this new perspective in greater detail, I try to summarize the argument I have made thus far, by highlighting the specificity of a biopedagogical view in relation to the approaches I discussed in the former parts of this article. Contrary to the mainstream, (Merleau-Pontian) view, a biopedagogical view does not instrumentalize the body in view of objectives that are external to it (putting our bodies' potential for meaning-constitution or sociality at use for a more efficient math or citizenship education, etc.). Rather, it seeks the educational *in* bodily experience itself. To put it differently: whereas the mainstream view can be described as a form of *education through the body*, I am trying to conceive a form of true

*bodily education*. This alternative view takes moreover the body seriously as far as it is *just body* (i.e. in its full physicality), instead of gauging the value of the corporeal in relation to the capacities that in former times were reserved for the realm of the disembodied mind (which, as I argued with Nancy, is what Merleau-Ponty's philosophy eventually does). This view is therefore closer to a biopolitical framework, in which the body's 'bodiliness' is taken for granted and which approaches education starting from this body rather than the other way around. This perspective is not sufficient, however, because the corporeal and the educational are dealt with too one-dimensionally: the body is solely seen as a threat to an educational system and this system is merely defined as aimed at the reproduction and continuation of a productivity-centered societal order. The question remains then how the body, taken as the *physical* body, might play this *intrinsically* educational role. I will try to explain this biopedagogical view in the next sections of this article.

#### CORPOREAL EXPERIENCE AND EQUALITY

To elucidate this alternative approach I first go deeper into a criticism which probably comes to mind to many readers familiar with post-structuralism. In view of the large scholarship which has revealed that the body is always a socially and culturally constructed body, it must seem objectionable when I claim that we should consider the body 'as such, 'in its full physicality', in its 'bodiliness', or 'as far as it is just body'. There is no direct access to the body, as every experience of the body and every discourse on the body is by definition mediated by dimensions that are not physical (Butler 1993, Crawley 2008): the particular language we happen to speak, meaning that the use of one set of possible categorizations and conceptualizations of the reality we live in at the detriment of (all) others, more often than not gives us the false impression that the way in which we contingently construct reality is reality itself. The same goes for contingent values regarding childhood and adulthood, masculinity and femininity, etc. that vary from time to time and place to place. And so, there is no such



thing as ‘the’ body, there are only ‘bodies’ that are differently experienced and spoken about according to circumstances. Even things that at first sight seem ‘obvious’ and ‘universally valid’, say for instance that the body is everything that is safely contained under our skins, is itself a social, cultural and historical construct: there have been times, even not so long ago, when the border that divides the inside of the body from its outside was perceived completely different, as for instance Claudia Benthien (2002) shows in connection with the common surgical procedure of trepanation, which was popular till late in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. What is more, the very idea that there is something like ‘the physical body’ and that we may produce universally valid knowledge about it, can be exposed as a very dangerous power-strategy: such discourse is only apparently ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ and precisely because of the impartiality it claims it hides from view that only one possible way of looking at the body is promoted, which secures the dominance of the modern, western, male, heterosexual way of life.

It is obviously not my intention to deny all this. However, my plea for a biopedagogy has nothing to do whatsoever with defending the possibility of a direct and immediate access to something like transcultural and transhistorical corporeality. Rather, I would like to bring under attention something else, that is however all too easily forgotten, when we are solely concerned with the social and cultural construction of our experience of the body, viz. that there are moments during which we fully coincide with the corporeal side of our existence (whatever the meaning of the corporeal might be). Examples of moments when this might be experienced are: being taken by a fit of laughter, suffering severe exhaustion, getting totally absorbed by repetitive bodily activity (running or marching in group, choir practice, etc.) or losing oneself in a moment of intense sexual gratification or drunkenness. Again, I am not denying that the meaning of bodily drill or orgasm is itself dependent upon contingent cultural, historical and other non-physical conditions. I do agree that the experience of the

body (as laughing body, as singing body, etc.) is indeed different depending on all these factors. But, what I am interested in here is not an *experience of the body*. On the contrary, what is at stake is precisely *bodily experience*, i.e. a moment during which the physical side of our existence is entirely affirmed. The expression ‘physical’ does not refer to an objective level of reality (which is indeed inaccessible and even dangerous to conceive), but to a possible experience that we might have at any time and any place: that we *are* ‘flesh’. For obvious reasons, I will omit a discussion on intoxication and orgasm, as the focus of this article is on the educational meaning of the body. Therefore I turn to an analysis of a phenomenon that has met with little interest in educational theory, but that happens anyway in educational contexts: bursting out in communal laughter. I have no place here to go into detailed analyses of concrete cases, but I am convinced that the phenomenon at hand is a very well-known one. I concentrate on this example, because it is a *most literally* affirmation of the physical side of our lives.

Following here the magisterial analysis of this phenomenon by the German phenomenologist Helmuth Plessner (1961), laughter can be described as a strong corporeal experience during which we are brought radically ‘out of position’. This is to say that when we roar with laughter, we no longer answer the situation we find ourselves in as self-contained subjects. It is rather as if ‘the body answers in our place’ (Ibid., p. 155). We are overmastered by the rhythmical and aggressive contractions of midriff, vocal cords and facial musculature, and give ourselves over to a set of unbridled and involuntarily spasms. Instead of answering as self-contained subjects, we wholly coincide with the physical side of our existence, or perhaps more adequately formulated: we coincide with the ‘flesh’ that we are.

When we succumb to laughter, we are no longer master over our own existence. However, one might object that this laughter is often used as a way to gain intentional control over a situation: we may for instance *laugh with* other people (when we put them on their right, i.e.

inferior, place) or we may *smile* to one another (to express sympathy or to alleviate a difficult situation). In these cases laughter appears as a means that expresses our deeper intentions and which strengthens our own subject-positions. However, Plessner claims that scolding laughter or smiling are only secondary phenomena and are no *real* laughter (they are laughter only in a metaphorical sense). These concern ways of behavior that actively take control over a more fundamental form of laughter. This 'pure' form of laughter consists in being passively seized by the almost mechanical shaking of our bodies. This kind of laughter is thus non-expressive: *it is beyond all intentionality*. That is also why it often happens without any good reason. And if there is a good reason why someone laughs, this reason is in a sense only secondary, as other people might be infected by this behavior and start laughing themselves. The fact that laughter is so contagious underlines its radically passive nature: when we *break out* in laughter, we are totally gripped by a body beyond any intentional control, and as such we experience *to be wholly 'flesh'*.

Roaring with laughter is therefore one of the most explicit affirmations of the physical side of our lives. Once more, I want to stress that I am not making here any claims regarding the physical as an objective or universal reality. 'Being wholly flesh' is a merely descriptive category that tries to do justice to the kind of experience I have analyzed. Now, what interests me is how we relate to laughter in the sphere of teaching and learning. Laughter can take place any time and any place, and is bound to happen in classrooms and other educational settings too. The way in which laughter is mostly dealt with forms a most telling illustration of everything I have said so far regarding corporeality and education.

As a rule educationalists respond in a negative way to the phenomenon of laughter, considering it as an inconvenience to avoid (schools demand above all seriousness). If it does take place most teachers leave no stone unturned to reinstall order. This condescending attitude vis-à-vis laughter could be explained by invoking once more the dualist and

intellectualist prejudices that exist in the world of education. A biopolitical perspective, however, grants a far more satisfying account, as it explains more convincingly the unwelcome nature of laughter: this concerns a form of behavior that confronts us with a body that functions autonomously, and that draws all attention to the excessive and unproductive dimension of the human condition. This is irreconcilable with the existing societal order, which is aimed at maximal control and productiveness, and which has to be safeguarded by the school and its own pedagogical order. Hence the negative valuation or restrictive regulation of laughter in school. What I propose to do is to set a step further and to regard this anarchic character of laughter not so much as a threat to the existing societal and pedagogical order – which it is – but as something positive, which is *in and of itself* educational. Therefore a further consideration of this phenomenon is required.

In a sense it doesn't matter the least whom we find ourselves together with in laughter. When we experience to be wholly flesh and relate to one another accordingly, neither similarities, nor differences in personal identity or social position matter. On the one hand, we don't need to have something in common in order to be able to laugh together. Even people who aren't able to communicate verbally because they have no common language can burst out in laughter together (see: Driesen 1977). Again, I am not referring here to expressive and intentional types of laughter (smiling or deriding) which obviously do presuppose the shared understanding of a given situation (e.g. that we agree that husbands shouldn't address their spouse with the name of their mistress). On the other hand, laughter has the force to make disappear all existing differences and hierarchies: children can laugh together with their parents, as do students and teachers, employers and employees, etc. (Lingis 2005). In other words, when we roar with laughter, we relate *directly* to one another, irrespective of the socially mediated distinctions that normally structure our 'being together'. This is to say that as a rule differences and correspondences in identity and position decide on who we do and

don't interact with and on the depth of these relations. In communal laughter *all societal ordering becomes inoperative*: position or identity are *neither* dimensions that separate us, *nor* preconditions that unite us. People who laugh are, despite the well-defined positions they have, *equal* (Cf. Bakhtin 1984). This doesn't mean that we discover an equality at a factual or a moral level. Laughter rather concerns an intense bodily experience that is at the same time an equalizing experience.

In other words, laughter has the force to interrupt the way in which we normally give shape to communal existence. By analogy with the biopolitical view on this matters, I could draw the conclusion here that laughter poses a danger not only to the societal order, but also to the pedagogical order which secures the introduction of the new generation into the existing societal order. The equalizing experience that is intrinsic to an outbreak of laughter is unbearable for the school in the way it is normally organized. After all the very existence of schools demands a clear distinction between those who are professionally in charge and the immature who still have to learn. And, schools, as traditionally conceived, are defined as places that are meant to select students in view of what they potentially could contribute to the existing society: as such it is always presupposed that social life *should* be organized according to well-distinguished roles and positions and that all individuals *should* be interested in finding and developing a substantial personal identity. For these reasons laughter and education don't seem to go together.

The core of my argument is that we might see things precisely the other way around. If it is true that, when laughing, we relate to one another without any interest in defining our societal positions, because we only relate to one another as far as we are flesh, something radically new and unexpected becomes possible. For a moment it doesn't matter whatsoever who we are, nor who the other is, and so we might sense, in our flesh, *that there is no necessity whatsoever in any given societal order*. What we experience is that we are equal, not in a

factual, ontological or moral sense, but in relation to an open future (a future that is not as yet destined). What happens here – following Arendt’s definition (1958) - can be called *truly educational*: we experience that things might begin anew. This implies of course that we no longer follow a sociological definition of education (getting the right woman at the right place, offering possibilities to students to realize their deepest self and so to contribute to the flourishing of society as a whole). On the contrary, this means that we rethink education through the possibility of corporeal experience.

Referring to a distinction Foucault makes (2005, p. 134), education is then no longer conceived as a form of ‘educare’ (leading *in*, i.e. the preparation for a later adult life), but as a form of ‘educere’ (leading *out*, exposing students to unforeseeable possibilities), which is actually the Latin origin of this word. This is to say that the most significant ‘educational’ moments are those that (by interrupting an existing ordering of individual and collective life) grant the possibility of the radically new. Instead of being interested in finding an *appropriate* place in social life, these moments allow for an experience of ex-position and *expropriation* of ourselves.

All this might suggest conclusions I don’t want to draw, and therefore I return a last time to the example of laughter. My account thus far is not complete, because in recent times some authors (e.g. Gruntz-Stoll & Rissland 2002, Gordon 2010) have developed a quite positive approach regarding laughter in schools. They stress, among other things, that laughter promotes a more relaxed class atmosphere, that it enforces communal ties or that it stimulates creativity and the activation of both sides of the brain. I can’t stress enough that this can’t be further removed from my biopedagogical approach: the authors I mention turn laughter into a pedagogical *tool* for achieving objectives that are external to the corporeal side of life. Therefore laughter isn’t being allowed for what it is, i.e. a strongly physical experience in which we affirm to be entirely flesh. Moreover, when laughter is promoted as a desirable

mode of behavior, scholars tend to focus on the many virtues of humor (e.g. because it might stimulate a relativizing attitude towards life), and so there is as a rule no interest whatsoever in laughter as a *physical* experience.

If laughter has an educational meaning in the sense I discussed, it can never be made functional to objectives that are extrinsic to bodily experience itself. And that is precisely what happens when laughter is being appreciated when it serves already established educational goals. A biopedagogical perspective, on the contrary, starts from the strong bodily experience laughter is. Therefore it is the least of my intentions to prescribe concrete pedagogical reforms, e.g. suggesting that we should laugh more or introduce a regime of laughter in schools. Then again, laughter would become an instrument. My point is rather that laughter can and will happen, and that teachers can take different attitudes towards it. They can forbid breakouts of laughter, try to suppress them or put them at use for all kind of objectives. It is only when they allow it as a strong corporeal experience, that indeed an openness towards a radically new future is granted.

#### POTENTIALITY AND THE EDUCATIONAL RELEVANCE OF THE BODY

In this final section, I will refine the idea that non-instrumental forms of corporeal experience can be educational. I will leave laughter behind and return to a pedagogical practice which even in a more *literal* way can be called ‘physical’ education, viz. repetitive forms of corporeal exercise. I refer here to things like running in group, marching or basic calisthenics (stretching and bending the most basic muscle groups over and over again and according to a fixed rhythm), which used to be the hard core of physical education programs in the western world, at least until the 70’s of the last century. I already mentioned earlier on that to a biopolitical perspective this practice forms a manifest illustration of how schooling contributed (consciously or surreptitiously) to a far-reaching disciplinarization through a

seizure of bodily energies (Gleyse 1997). Nevertheless, from a biopedagogical point of view, a reverse hypothesis might be formulated, analyzing repetitive bodily activity not so much as a suppression of the body (i.e. restraining spontaneity or the possibility to express and realize oneself while moving), but as an occasion that might go together with a complete affirmation of the corporeal side of existence.

What is at stake in this kind of exercise is movement *per se*. With this I mean that the practices that have become the standard activities of today's physical education curricula, (ranging from highly individualized training programs to all sorts of sport, athletics, play, dance, outdoor activities, etc.) always serve an internal goal (the enjoyment and internal gratification of movement) and/or an external goal (self-expression, health, limberness, velocity, strength, stamina, 'physical literacy', but also the 'sociomotor skills' I discussed in the first part, like learning to cope with winning and losing or learning to cooperate). Repetitive activities that are concerned with the most simple and basic movement possibilities (stretching, bending, rotating, walking, running, etc.), on the contrary, are not intrinsically gratifying, and moreover exclude major external rewards. To refer to a terminology coined by Agamben (2000), sport, dance, athletics, etc. are always experienced either as 'pure ends' (autotelic gratification) or as 'means in view of an end'. In contrast, marching, basic calisthenics, etc. are 'pure means': they are disposed of any internal or external purpose and make us experience movement as far as it is *just movement*. Movement is experienced as such.

This kind of exercise is something we are not inclined to do spontaneously. Perhaps, that is why its proper place is perhaps the school, whilst activities one more likely engages in spontaneously, like athletics or dance, have their place in the sphere of leisure (sportclubs). Because it concerns typically school-activities they are as a rule collectively performed: students move the same body parts at the same moment, following the instructions of a



teacher who is in charge. I believe this is of the greatest importance, because it makes one disappear as a self-possessed subject amidst an aggregation of bodies that respond to a fixed rhythm. And so, performing repetitive and collective movement, students might experience to coincide with their moving bodies. In that sense they might have a strong experience of being flesh: they are nothing more than bodies that move exactly the way all the others do.

However, this last formulation is still too negative and perhaps I should better say that they experience to be *entirely moving bodies*. At such moment, just like in the case of laughter, it is no longer possible to stick to any precise or substantial identity and position (and this is, once more, in sharp contrast to sport, athletics, etc. which are precisely wholly focused on enhancing identities and positions: there are always winners and losers, one constantly tries to improve one's own record, etc.). When physical education is taken literally as an education concerned with the physical *as such*, what is at stake is the possibility of a corporeal experience that is intrinsically equalizing – meaning that students are equal in relation to a radically open future. Precisely here might reside the educational meaning of the physical in physical education.

This is of course not to deny the historical fact that indeed many things I have just described in positive terms (repetition, drill, collective activity) have been misused for the most horrible causes, especially as a preparation for warfare (Gleyse 1997). But, in view of my biopedagogical analysis, a different story might be told. With the invention of mass schooling, moving bodies were brought together in school. This entailed an equalizing potential, which however was immediately *appropriated* and *put at use* by totalitarian regimes. Bodies had to be made subservient to a so called 'higher cause', turning democratic flesh into cannon fodder. In other words the potentially educational force of collective movement forms was exploited and linked to objectives that had nothing to do with corporeal experience. As such the disciplinarization of the body through drill and calisthenics can be seen as an immunization

against a more original, intrinsically equalizing and communizing sense of these exercises. In this regard, McNeill (1995) makes an even stronger point, showing by many historical and anthropological illustrations how drill is the most original humanizing and community-building factor in history, and how time and again drill has been instrumentalized by the powers that be.

A true educational form of repetitive and collective body exercise, however, relates to the possibility that movement is disposed of any functionality, and can be experienced as such. Turning once more to the work of Agamben (1999), what is at stake here could be analyzed in terms of what he calls 'potentiality'. This term does not refer to the ordinary experience of being able to realize something ('I can do *this*' or 'I can do *that*', e.g. actualizing one's capacity for movement when one proves to be able to do twenty set-ups in one minute or to set an athletic record). It rather refers to something that is much more significant and which is always implied in any experience of ability or success, but which is usually not experienced as such. This concerns the experience, difficult to express in the English language (though perfectly expressible in Italian), *that I can*. The stress is not on *what* I can, but on the fundamental characteristic of human existence that we aren't creatures of necessity. In order to have such a strong experience of possibility, the things we are able to do need to be disconnected from their normal use and to appear as 'pure means'. For instance, writing or reading this text it is obvious that the reader/writer *can* read/speak. However, at this moment she can only experience to be able *to read/write this text*. There is no experience of *being-able*. This is only granted at the very moment that language no longer has any functionality, but appears *as such*. More concretely, this might happen when we keep repeating a word over and over again, until it ceases to refer to anything (Agamben 2005, p. 76): the word no longer functions as a reference to a concrete thing, but shows at this moment the very possibility *that words can refer, that words can convey meaning*. It is only at the precise moment that the

connection between our actions and concrete purposes is suspended that we are allowed to experience potentiality. So, paradoxically as it might sound, only at the moment of 'impotentiality' (Agamben 1999, p. 182), at the moment that we 'cannot' (speak), we might experience in the fullest sense of that word that we 'can' (speak).

The same applies, I argue, to the most basic, 'meaningless' and purposeless forms of movement (marching, running, simple calisthenics): in this case movement is disposed of any concrete aim (students are unable to realize themselves through movement) and so they may experience that they *can* move (rather than that they can *do sit-ups* or *do athletics*). Analogously, the phenomenon of bursting out in laughter could be analyzed as linked to normal forms of expression (verbal language, body language) that are at the same time disposed of any functionality. When succumbing to non-expressive spasms and gestures, we are no longer able to realize our plans and intentions, but at the same time this condition of incapacity is necessary for being able to experience the potentiality of expressing meaning (i.e. that we *can* express meaning). And, that is perhaps the most fundamental sense in which corporeal experience can be termed *intrinsically educational*.

I am well aware that all this might sound paradoxical, as education is usually defined in terms of self-actualization and self-realization. But, as I explained with Arendt and Foucault earlier on in this article, 'education' in its most original sense (leading *out*, rather than leading *in*) refers to *moments* (rather than institutions) which imply a break in the normal course of things and the existing ways in which we give order and meaning to our individual and collective existence. More specifically, what is granted to take place at these moments is to experience that all can begin anew.

This possibility of a truly new (unforeseeable) way of living-together (communal existence) is what makes situations and practices which allow for a strongly corporeal experience

educationally significant. Here we relate to one another ‘in the flesh’, without any mediation of social categories or the interest in a fixed identity. Any attempt or desire to *order* social existence loses all meaning. Rather, ‘living together’ can only be *affirmed* in a direct sense, i.e. *as wholly physically*. We literally affirm that we *live* together, and this renders us *equal*, not in a factual, ontological or moral sense, but in view of an open future. Equality in this sense is not the reverse side of hierarchy (‘we are all the same’ as we are not unequal), but a suspension of any (hierarchical or egalitarian) logic as such.

This is what is at stake in the body-centered approach, to which I have been referring as biopedagogy. Over and against the main-stream body-centered pedagogies that are prominent today (in the wake of Merleau-Ponty and others) and that only values the body in view of educational goals that are extrinsic to corporeal experience, a biopedagogical point-of-view professes the idea that the body in its ‘bodiliness’ has an *intrinsically* educational relevance. In that sense it is also different from the biopolitical approach. Such a view does not require that we immediately turn these insights into a general theory of teaching one just has to apply. This would after all imply that we install a biopedagogical *regime*, turning again the body into an instrument. What is demanded is that teachers, or whoever is ‘in charge’, take an *attitude* that is wholly *affirmative* towards the physical side of (social) existence.

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