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## **6 Utopian education – may the hope be with you**

**Olli-Pekka Moisio and Matti Rautiainen**

Educators work in a world facing challenges such as climate change, dramatically affecting our life now and in the future. Educators construct the future world through their work, because they prepare young generations for lives in a world that does not yet exist. Additionally, they educate children to live in the current world. This active role requires a combination of futurist imagination and its implementation in everyday life. This dual role has always been part of formal education praxis. For example in Finland, twenty-first century skills have been emphasized in the documents of educational policy along with application in the curricula of basic education and secondary schools in the 2010s (cf. National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2016). Therefore, the relationship between education and utopia is strong both theoretically and practically.

In utopian literature it is typical to describe the ideal state more precisely than the means to reach that state. Since the earliest utopias, like Plato's description of Atlantis, utopias have included the key objectives of education, which make a utopia possible. From the nineteenth century onwards, new political ideologists, especially within the socialist movement, focused also on how the state of ideology (utopia) would be created and how education would promote the new society (see. e.g. Kropotkin 1974[1912]). In the twentieth century, when political ideologies shifted to meet the educational policies of nation states, utopian ideas became concrete goals for educational policy and practice in the everyday life of educational institutions. Finland displays a typical example of this movement, and e.g. curricula for basic education reflected strongly concepts of hope, equality, democracy and future.

In this chapter, we study the relationship between utopia and education from three viewpoints. First, the question of human existence, especially hope and despair, which are at the core of education and utopia. Second, Paulo Freire's pedagogical thinking, as Freire created a concept of utopian education for educators to use utopian thinking in their work as educators. Third, we introduce a case study example on how utopia can be visible in the everyday life of educators.

## Forward Dawning

At the junction of past and future, our lives merge with fleeting moments. We wait for something to arrive. Anticipation is a communication between past and future. This is beautifully illustrated in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. At the end of the Part 7, Anna arrives to the railroad station (a constant motif of the novel):

'Walking through the crowd into the first-class waiting room, she gradually recalled all the details of her situation and the decisions among which she had been hesitating. And first hope, then despair over old hurts again began to chafe the wounds of her tormented, terribly fluttering heart. Sitting on a star-shaped sofa and waiting for the train, looking with revulsion at the people coming in and going out (they all disgusted her), she thought of how she would arrive at the station, write a note to him, and of what she would write, then of how he was now complaining to his mother (not understanding her suffering) about his situation, and how she would come into the room and what she would say to him. Then she thought of how life could still be happy, and how tormentingly she loved and hated him, and how terribly her heart was pounding'. (Tolstoy 2001[1878], 513-514.)

There is obvious tension at the junction of the past and future. Anna simultaneously recollects past events and hopes for the future. Hope and hopelessness, anticipation of good and bad, sway steadily in her mind.

The human being lives in the space between the determined fate as a social being and is always in danger of losing individuality and dignity under the constant pressure of social convention and the expectations of respectability. In addition, resolution against this pressure in the form of unrestrained gratification of the spontaneous ego, and of freedom, seems to point to danger, discomfort, and the ultimate and inevitable disaster of the individual. Thus, Anna truly is, as she says repeatedly, both guilty and yet not to blame. She is the tragic victim of human nature

which calls both for the unhindered expression of the individual and the antithetical acknowledgment of the ultimate dependence of the individual upon the social.

Ernst Bloch (1995) argued that the human being is not yet fully determined. We all encompass a potential future self and this is the starting point for analysis, the route towards ourselves, the archeology of our self. The ontological meaning of unfinishedness or incompleteness assumes the form of longing for the totally other, the fulfillment of the human being. This longing is a central feature of the utopian impulse. Utopianism is a reaction to the felt incompleteness. Zygmunt Bauman (2003, 11) writes that the utopian 'urge to transcendence', rooted in our ontological incompleteness, is a 'constitutive feature of humanity'.

Paolo Freire (1998, 58) saw that 'it is in our incompleteness, of which we are aware, that education as a permanent process is grounded'. Our incompleteness grounds our educability and curiosity, our inquisitive yearning for something more, to be more than we are, feeds the process of learning. If we think about teaching in this context, we see it as a call from an unfinished person towards other unfinished persons to reach wholeness together. An axiomatic starting point of education is to see it as action that grounds the very possibility for human beings to reach fullness, while the practical form of this call would be a space for human beings to understand their concrete incompleteness. It is only through this process, that we as human beings can attain the motivation to search for something that not yet is.

'If we reflect on the fact that our human condition is one of essential unfinishedness, that, as a consequence, we are incomplete in our being and in our knowing, then it becomes obvious that we are 'programmed' to learn, destined by our very incompleteness to seek completeness, to have a 'tomorrow' that adds to our 'today.' In other words, wherever there are men and women, there is always and inevitably something to be done, to be completed, to be taught, and to be learned'. (Freire 1998, 80.)

What we can become exists already in our present selves, but concealed behind the clamor of the given condition. The teacher works here as a utopian archeologist by trying to unearth

utopian possibilities. Becoming more than we are requires the ability to maneuver through the noise of the present. The problem is that the language used in this process is the very same language that hinders the process. This forms the tragedy of utopia and the limitation of the possibility of utopia (Sargisson 2012, 39).

If the fulfillment of the human being is present, an opportunity emerges to begin loosening the chains of the given situation upon an individual. Each apparently airtight governing system is eventually very porous and has cracks if one actively searches for them (see Lakkala in this volume). As Bloch writes in the introduction to the *Principle of Hope*: 'The world is full of propensity towards something, tendency towards something, latency of something, and this intended something means fulfilment of the intending.' This dynamism is visible, as people act in the hope of so far unrealized human fulfillment. Our mind is set free in the new horizons opened by our daydreams. In these daydreams, utopia is transformed into the practice of outlining the not present in the given situation. 'But something's missing,' as one of the main characters in Bertolt Brecht's opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), insists while his friends continue to celebrate life.

The given situation pushes us towards the future unrelentingly, but our sight is fixed to the past. We stand upon the apparently full, but in the end empty present, because what is missing in the present is hidden underneath the material conditions and ideological justifications of the given conditions. Hegemonic ideologies change futures to eternal repetitions of the present. Variation might exist, but the key to harmony stays constant. This situation is further emphasized when disintegrative processes reach the anticipatory consciousness in education and our daily lives. Henry Giroux (2013) calls these cultural processes and functions of public schooling the 'disimagination machine':

'The 'disimagination machine' is both a set of cultural apparatuses extending from schools and mainstream media to the new sites of screen culture and a public pedagogy that functions primarily to undermine the ability of individuals to think critically, imagine the unimaginable, and engage in thoughtful and critical

dialogue. Put simply, to become critically informed citizens of the world.' (Giroux 2013, 263).

This disimagination machine collapses the future in to present and makes it difficult or even impossible to think beyond the existing society, be it in terms of good society, just distribution of wealth, etc. The horizon is blocked by the existing construction.

Max Horkheimer, a key member of the so-called Frankfurt School, wrote in his book *Eclipse of Reason* (1947) about how the collapse of the Enlightenment project of objective reason has opened the way for a society ruled by subjective reason. Horkheimer characterizes subjective reason as the reason of formal mathematics and scientific thinking the content of which is seen as politically and morally neutral. This is instrumental thinking in its purest, most rigorous form.

'The present crisis of reason consists fundamentally in the fact that at a certain point thinking either became incapable of conceiving such objectivity at all or began to negate it as a delusion. This process was gradually extended to include the objective content of every rational concept. In the end, no particular reality can seem reasonable per se; all the basic concepts, emptied of their content, have come to be only formal shells. As reason is subjectivized, it also becomes formalized'. (Horkheimer 2013[1947], 4.)

Horkheimer argues that in the history of philosophical and scientific reasoning, those who have adopted objective reason have considered themselves determining the fundamental ends. In a sense, they have claimed that human reason has scope over given conditions and situations by stressing the teleological concerns of humanity. Even though Horkheimer was critical towards the philosophies of objective reason, he saw the responsible application of this kind of reasoning to allow us to find what is good, and what some particular goal ought to be. Subjective reasoning is more limited in scope. Rather than identifying ends, it merely 'coordinates' the appropriate means with some given ends in a given system. In other words, the question turns from 'What constitutes a good life?' to 'If I wish to accomplish x, what line of action must I take?'

Utopian anticipatory thought places itself between objective and subjective reason. It forms a link between the given and the hoped. The anticipatory consciousness is connected with the remembrance of the past, with many having a sense of a repressed past. Walter Benjamin wrote in his famous *Theses on the Concept of History* (1940) about now-time which contains the dynamical relationship between past and future. The role of thinking is to explode the present as possibilities of something other than the given. Utopian pedagogy can be such an act.

### **From Utopian Pedagogy came Forward Movement**

The term 'utopian' is often taken to refer to unrealistic ideas and improving the world in a way which will prove unsustainable, when tested against the real world. We argue that utopian thinking both draws upon and generates ideas capable of informing educational practices. Utopian thinking incorporates 'social dreaming' (see Introduction and Laakso in this volume), the complex of 'dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live.'

Teachers have an enormous task in their hands. They must help prepare a new generation to live in a so far non-existing world. This means that teachers should enable and encourage students to take an active role in the construction of future society. Only this activity animates the world to be what it is hoped to be. This active role requires the simultaneous skills of imagination and active participation. In a sense, we all live in a mirrored room. Constant reflections from the walls covered by mirrors makes the room intriguing yet strangely frightening at the same time. We can be aware of what is and how we have reached the present, but not what will happen in the future. The gap between continuity and change is constantly present in the life of a teacher.

Freire (1972) initially coined the notion of utopian pedagogy in *Cultural Action for Freedom*. Utopian pedagogy is a form of pedagogy, which is both highly critical and oppositional towards the given, and thus opens-up a forward-looking horizon of new possibilities. Criticism is

connected with a 'utopian vision about the human being and the world' (Freire 1972, 40). This practice is deeply dialogical in nature. In a pedagogical dialogue, the teacher and the student investigate together existing inhuman tendencies and proclaim the change in the name of humanity. In this practice, utopia is a reflection of where we are now. Without utopias, we would not know where we are standing and where we should be going.

Utopian pedagogy begins with the archeology of consciousness. The aim of archeology is to unearth the hidden and repressed (Freire 1981, 58). Fredric Jameson (2005) writes about archeology of futures and Ruth Levitas (2013) define archeology the main form of the utopian method. Future manifests itself as ruins. Among these ruins of the past, the given moment, and the hopes of the past and present human beings, an educational archeologist connects the clues to be able to find the blurred outlines of possible futures. Utopias have many faces. It is upon the observer to decide if utopia is the representation of the desirable dream or a daydreaming, unattainable dream or something in between.

To get back to Jameson, we can summarize his project into the two very short statements. On the one hand, 'we have to name the system' (1995, 418); on the other, we have to *learn how to imagine utopia* (1988, 355). In the first case, there is the problem of mapping the totality of social relations within the disorienting conditions and political uncertainty of late stage capitalism.

'An aesthetic of cognitive mapping – a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system – will necessarily have to respect this now enormously complex representation dialectic and invent radically new forms in order to do it justice'.  
(Jameson 1995, 54.)

For Jameson the map becomes pedagogical at the point when the individual situates the local in relation to global. Such a map gives understanding to contradictions within capitalism without ideologically resolving these contradictions. This kind of cognitive map speaks not simply to the learning of new content, but rather, the process of learning to learn in a new way

antithetical to standardization and to thinking, which parallelize reason with reality, and fact with the absolute.

In the second case, we face the question of envisioning a different world within a world that is hermetically closed to promote the given. Analyzing the material and political preconditions for utopian imagination, Jameson (2004, 45-46) suggests that utopias are written during 'periods of great social ferment but seemingly rudderless, without any agency or direction; reality seems malleable, but not the system; and it is that very distance of the unchangeable system from the turbulent restlessness of the real world that seems to open up a moment of ideational and utopian-creative free play in the mind itself or in the political imagination'.

### **From Despair to Hope – Utopian Education in Practice**

Jameson's two points 1) *we have to name the system* (1995, 418) and 2) *we have to learn how to imagine utopia* (1988, 355) resonate strongly with the objectives of teachers' work in schools. Two temporal aspects, present and future, are at the core of their work, but the orientations towards this can vary a lot in the systems where teachers and schools have an autonomous position, like in Finland. Accordingly, orientations vary from the attitude where world is 'taken as granted' to a critical approach towards work and society, including utopian thinking. In Finland, teachers live between tensions, where the curriculum strengthens them to imagine the future, and at the same time, practical political solutions force them to take into account demands coming from the labour market or politicians in power. This creates a visible conflict: How is it possible to seek a better world without hegemonies in a world based on hegemonies, seems to be a perennial wicked problem in education (Värri 2019). Nevertheless, the autonomous educational system and trust bestowed on teachers creates a frame, where utopian thinking and implementation is possible. Next, we will introduce a concrete example of a school community practicing utopian education, beginning with its context.

Post World War II Finland was an agrarian republic with deep class divides, which also reached into the field of education. The educational system was unequal, and secondary school was

expensive and therefore inaccessible for most children from poor families. Since the 1950s, the system was vocally criticized especially by left-wing parties, and in the 1960s and 1970s, a radical educational reform was implemented as part of the welfare-state construction process. In the process, the parallel school system (where part of the students applied to grammar school after 4<sup>th</sup> grade) was replaced by a nine-year comprehensive school. In addition, the social security system was reformed to support educational equality. Education was no longer dependent on the student's family background and wealth.

Huge structural reforms in education continued at the turn of the 1980s and into the 1990s, when the existing school inspection system was dismantled. In practice, schools became highly autonomous units in terms of both pedagogy and the operative culture, in the frame of a national core curriculum. Since the early 1990s, Finnish education has been based on trust among stakeholders in society, because the national core curriculum is loose and thus enables different interpretations to be made by teachers in the school community. The ethos of the curriculum and developmental work in education emphasize teachers as intellectual communities responsible for carrying out the objectives written in the content of curricula since the 1970s. However, the big question is: are teachers and schools living and implementing this utopia in their everyday life?

We have met dozens of teacher communities in different contexts: in-service training, shared teaching experiments and research collaboration. Conversations with them have been similar year after year. Teachers are satisfied with their autonomy and pedagogical freedom, and very committed to their work. On the other hand, teachers feel that their work is too individual. They wish to have more co-operation, conversations and time with their colleagues in their everyday lives. The tension between individuality and communality is an integral part of teachers' communities and their day-to-day-lives.

The initial teacher education emphasizes critical and reflexive attitudes and skills, trained mostly via group-work (see e.g. Curricula 2014-2017). Why, then does this kind of professional development not continue in schools? Why are teacher communities in schools not constructed

around critical, communal reflection, for example in the sense of collective, critical reflection defined by Suoranta and Moision (2006). We argue that:

1. Teachers avoid risk-taking, to challenge the tradition of individuality in teacher's work (teacher as the individual survivor).
2. Conditions at the school level do not support communality as a basis for teachers' work.
3. Change is technically simple, but socially complex (Fullan 1982). The creation of a new culture requires a lot of common value-making through discussion and working together. This demands a lot of time as well as openness towards new thinking.

As stated earlier, Finnish schools are autonomous units. In addition, schools are like mirrors for themselves. They are similar all around the country, even if the differences have been growing during past years because of various factors like educational leadership, different teaching and learning experiments, and collaboration with other stakeholders in society.

We reflect our three arguments mentioned above in the context of one school, which has been under huge change during the past three years: from despair to hope, from individuality to communality and from strict structures towards flexible structures. In other words, the school represents utopian education in practice. This school under study is located in Sannainen, near the old medieval city of Porvoo, 50 kilometers east from Helsinki. It is a Swedish-speaking rural primary school, with eight teachers and six classrooms. Teachers started a radical change in 2017. The reason behind the change was despair. Teachers were extremely exhausted. Many of them felt powerless in the front of pupils, who were misbehaving. Teachers worked without interaction with colleagues, sick leaves were frequent and angst towards the everyday-life in school and the teaching profession grew day by day. The other author of this article interviewed teachers in Sannainen School in autumn 2017, and again in 2018. The following analysis is based mostly on this data, and visits to the school including observations in classrooms.

In 2017, a U-turn was made among teachers. According to many teachers, they faced a wicked problem. They understood that they could not continue working the way they did, yet couldn't see or find any solution to the problem, because it couldn't be solved on the level of individual action. Problems concerned the whole school, not only one classroom. Finally, the school's management was re-organised: a new pedagogical leader was appointed. She was a teacher who had experience and interest to develop the school according to principles of new curriculum. The aim of the work of the pedagogical leader was to supervise teachers towards a community-based learning organization. This was a new role, as schools do not usually have a specific pedagogical leader. In other words, a new agent in the school brought hope for the teachers.

What did the new pedagogue bring to the school then? The national core curriculum for basic education emphasizes active and inquiry-based learning processes, stronger student participation in schools and stronger interaction with other stakeholders in society. Since the early 1970s, when the first curriculum for the 9-year long comprehensive school was written, curricula have represented a utopia of an equal, democratic and humane society reflected in education and schools. Curriculum after curriculum, these themes have been restated and emphasized, but at the same time schools are far from realising these big objectives. The pedagogical leader brought these big ideas and questions back to the community of teachers. Hope already existed in the school, but teachers had forgotten it.

The change that the pedagogical leader offered for the teachers was based on the idea of collaborative work around the curriculum and theme-based learning in classrooms. She asked: Could such a school be conceivable, where learning would follow themes rather than subjects? Could it be possible to build a strong collaborative culture between teachers? And finally: Could there be more space for the voice of the pupils in the school? The first reactions from the teachers were astonishment, signaling incomprehension and disbelief. However, because of the prevailing desperation, the new pedagogical leader was given the possibility to explore these questions. The teachers thought that the situation could not get any worse.

During 2017, the teachers gathered, every week, for hours, to read the curriculum and discuss how they understood not only the contents, but also the spirit of the curriculum. Week after week, teachers became more and more interested in new ideas that they developed together. Finally, the teachers created a new interpretation (utopia) on what their primary school should be like, and began to implement their new model in the following autumn. In our interviews, they all described a similar kind of developmental process, in which they first were astonished by the ideas presented to them by the pedagogical leader, but later became critical towards their own former professional identity and the way of teaching. Shared work and experiences were strongly emancipatory by nature. It changed the professional identity of most of the teachers in Sannainen.

*As one teacher testifies: When I look at myself, and I think what I did before spring 2017, I look like a fool, a blind man, who was happy for the work he did, but did not understand at all the nature and deeper meanings of the profession. I could not believe anymore in teaching in the same way I worked earlier.*

The process created 'a flow' amongst teachers, indeed they use the word 'flow' to describe the state of their own community. In the beginning of this chapter, we gave three arguments on what prevents teacher communities from becoming collective and critical, with an ability to undertake utopian education. In the case of Sannainen:

1. Teachers avoided risk-taking, and they could not see any other way of schooling but the way they were socialized in. They needed a critical voice from outside the community to reveal this. Teachers were open because they were in a desperate situation and a new vision represented a future hope instead of a threat.
2. Sannainen school had a pedagogical leader, who supervised and supported the process of change. In other words, the pedagogical leader created space and time for teachers to gather and discuss and made utopian education possible.

3. Teachers were open to the new ideas as well as they were motivated to work hard towards their utopia as a teacher community. They constructed an intellectual community by themselves, trusting their capacity to work as a creative professional unit.

From these points of view, we want to ask three questions, closely related to utopian education as well as constructing collective and critical teacher communities.

- Is the state of despair among teachers a requirement for utopian education?
- Is utopian education possible within the frame and conditions of contemporary school structures?
- How can teachers emancipate and empower themselves for utopian education?

Openness and curiosity towards a new direction in the future were also mentioned by teachers in the interviews as key concepts in the professional development. Curiosity is also at the core of Paulo Freire's utopian education:

'The epitome of negation in the context of education is the stifling or inhibition of curiosity in the learner and, consequently, in the teacher too. In other words, the educator who is dominated by authoritarian or paternalistic attitudes that suffocate the curiosity of the learner finishes by suffocating his or her own curiosity.' (Freire 1998, 79.)

### **Dynamic connection of hope and despair**

In a sense, hope and despair are two sides of the same coin. This connection between hope and despair is as natural as day and night, death and life, or happiness and sorrow. One cannot have one without the other. Erich Fromm analyses this dynamic connection of hope and despair in the penultimate chapter of his book *You Shall Be As Gods* (Fromm 1966, 201- 223).

In the chapter on 'Psalms', Fromm tells that after the destruction of the Temple, Psalms became the most popular prayer book among the Jews. The psalms ceased to be part of the

Temple ritual practices and assumed a new function in this new historical situation. They became a human document, the expression of man's hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. They transcended the particular conditions of time and religious dogma and became the intimate friends and companions of Jews and Christians over many generations.

Fromm divides the psalms into one-mood psalms and dynamic psalms. It is the nature of the dynamic psalms that he wishes us to appreciate. They reflect a change of mood of the poet.

'The essential feature of the dynamic psalm consists in the fact that a change of mood is going on in the poet, a change that is reflected in the psalm. What happens is that the poet begins the psalm in a mood of sadness, depression, despair, or fear; usually, in fact, it is a blend of these various moods. At the end of the psalm his mood has changed; it is one of hope, faith, confidence. Often it seems as if the poet who composed the end of the psalm was a different man from the one who composed the beginning. Indeed, they are different, yet they are the same person. What happens is that a change has occurred within the Psalmist during the composition of the psalm, he has been transformed; or better, he has transformed himself from a despairing and anxious man into one of hope and faith.' (Fromm 1966, 207).

Fromm uses the word 'dynamic' to indicate that the change arises from the poet's struggle with his sense of despair. The struggle begins with an expression of despair, changes to a mood of hope, and then returns to deeper despair. Hope returns, only to plunge into deepest despair; and only at this point real hope emerges. Fromm uses this discussion of the dynamic psalm to convey his belief that only the person who experiences the full depth of his despair can liberate himself from despair and achieve hope (cf. Pekkola 2010, 139).

As argued by Sigmund Freud (2003) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, we all long for an initial state. In this initial state, someone else bears all the responsibility, in the most radical sense even thinks on our behalf. However, the road that leads to autonomy is the road that takes us

further away from this primordial state of oneness. In a sense, it starts when we suddenly see that not everything that we value was presented to us. I was not there. This one sort of alienation, or better still objectification, where we start to gain a foothold outside the miracle circle of the initial state, when we develop our self-consciousness, begins when there is enough positive experiences of our own possibilities and strengths. In this development of autonomy, the other is the key that opens or locks the doors. Nevertheless, our longing to return to the womb of the initial state never leaves us, and thus we live in a constant state of tension between the initial state and something that waits outside.

We want freedom and autonomy, but at the same time long for shelter, intimacy, and the atmosphere of trust. But the dread of losing ourselves into an involuntary and numb state of being drives us as an individual forcefully forwards. Capitalistic society teaches us to be careful not to lower our defences, so that our vulnerability or defenselessness becomes known to others. Vulnerability, which is a sine qua non, but not a sufficient reason for trust. Trust is needed for autonomy to emerge.

Utopian thought informs educational and social practices: it enables processes whereby intentional communities determine material practices; it shapes visions for improved world orders; and it pervades cultural production that engages with utopian and dystopian ideas. We should rehabilitate Friedrich Schiller's (1965[1795]), Herbert Marcuse's (1998[1955]), and Fredric Jameson's (2005) emphasis on play, for it is through the apparent political paralysis of the present that the mind is, ironically, liberated to engage in utopian dreaming beyond given historical and political conditions. It is for the radical utopian pedagogy to give a certain discipline to this spontaneous, collective, timeless play, for without such direction the play will lose its radical dimension and fail to fulfil the potential of our utopian hope.

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